

Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, known as H. Rap Brown in the 1960s, dies in federal prison at 82

Fred Mazelis
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Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, the fiery speaker and agitator known as H. Rap Brown when he led the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee down the path of black nationalism in the 1960s, has died in prison at the age of 82.

Al-Amin, serving a life sentence without parole in connection with the shooting death of an Atlanta sheriff's deputy in 2000, died in a North Carolina prison hospital. He was reportedly ill with multiple myeloma. Al-Amin had consistently maintained his innocence in the murder case and had appealed the conviction twice, most recently in 2019. He is survived by his wife of 53 years and his two sons.

H. Rap Brown was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1943, the son of a worker for Standard Oil and a mother who worked both as a domestic and a teacher. He later attended Southern University in Baton Rouge before traveling to Washington D.C. to participate in the civil rights movement, then at its peak. He was active in voter registration drives in Mississippi and Alabama.

After meeting Stokely Carmichael, then the head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known as SNCC, he quickly became prominent along with Carmichael in the faction of SNCC that opposed the pacifist orientation of the movement but from the standpoint of nationalism and separatism. When Brown became chairman of SNCC in 1967, one of his first actions was changing the name of SNCC to Student National Coordinating Committee.

H. Rap Brown became one of many figures associated with the civil rights struggle who attracted the attention of the FBI, then headed by the notorious racist and red-baiter J. Edgar Hoover. This was the

period in which the COINTELPRO program was used to heavily infiltrate the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and also to infiltrate the Black Panthers and set up the murders of such figures as Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago in 1969. Other Panther leaders were killed or jailed. H. Rap Brown's name was attached to a 1968 act of Congress entitled "H. Rap Brown Federal Anti-Riot Act," making it a crime to "incite, organize, promote or encourage" a riot. Brown had not played any public role in the rebellions that had swept Northern and Western cities, including Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles, but the racists and right wingers in Congress ignored that fact. Brown told the press at that time, quite accurately: "We don't control anybody. ... You don't organize rebellions."

The targeting and harassment of Brown continued and was intensified from that time, provoked in part by his incendiary language as head of SNCC. He was convicted of robbery in 1971 and, though insisting on his innocence, served five years of a 5- to 15-year sentence at the infamous Attica Prison in upstate New York.

It was there that the former SNCC leader converted to Islam. When he emerged from prison, his name had been changed to Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. He moved to Atlanta, Georgia, establishing a mosque, opening a small grocery, raising a family and becoming well-known for community work of various kinds.

The FBI campaign against Al-Amin never ended. After the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, he was questioned but not charged. In 1995, he was actually arrested in connection with a shooting case but released after the main witness admitted that he was pressured to incriminate Al-Amin or else face jail

himself. According to documents later uncovered by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the FBI sent paid informants into Al-Amin's mosque in an effort to link him to various crimes, including the drug trade and 14 murders. Again, despite the huge effort and expenditure, no charges were forthcoming.

Finally, in 2000, after a heavily-armed group of police descended on his home in the dark of night to serve a warrant on a relatively minor charge, the authorities nailed their target on a murder charge. One sheriff's deputy was killed and another was slightly wounded. The wounded deputy testified that Al-Amin was the killer, although the defense pointed out numerous holes in the prosecution case. The witness claimed that he had shot Al-Amin in the stomach, for instance, but when the defendant was arrested four days later, there was no sign of a wound or of blood on his clothes. There were other contradictions, but the prosecution secured a conviction, although the jury mandated a life sentence instead of the death penalty.

During his trial in 2002, Coretta Scott King was among numerous prominent figures who expressed concern that Al-Amin would not receive a fair trial. Among them was Andrew Young, the former mayor of Atlanta and one of the leading figures in the political establishment. An advertisement in the Atlanta newspaper along similar lines was signed by folksinger Pete Seeger, Congressman and former SNCC leader Julian Bond, poet Sonia Sanchez and others.

All the evidence, beginning from the murders of the 1960s and continuing through the revelations of the role of COINTELPRO, the harassment of Al-Amin in particular, and the shaky evidence at his 2000 trial, points in the direction of a frame-up. As Al-Amin himself declared, in an interview from prison with the *New York Times* on the eve of his 2002 trial: "The F.B.I. has a file on me containing 44,000 documents. At some point they had to make something happen to justify all the investigations and all the money they've spent."

The phrase perhaps most often associated with Al-Amin is that violence is "as American as cherry pie." It is somewhat ironic that his death occurs almost simultaneously with the airing of Ken Burns' latest series, *The American Revolution*. The 12-hour program depicts, among other things, the extreme violence of the revolutionary struggle conducted by the American

colonies against the British King George III from 1775 to 1783. Al-Amin was not wrong in recognizing the reality of violence and above all the responsibility of the oppressor for this violence. His program, however, was a bankrupt and reactionary one. It rejected socialist internationalism in favor of black nationalism. Nevertheless, Al-Amin's death requires a reaffirmation of the need to defend democratic rights in the face of the reactionary onslaught of a decaying social order.



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