

A Texas execution amid claims of racial bias in jury selection; a death sentence commuted in Alabama

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The state of Texas carried out the execution of Cedric Allen Ricks on the evening of Wednesday, March 11, putting him to death by lethal injection at the Huntsville Unit penitentiary. He was pronounced dead at 6:55 p.m. local time after receiving a dose of the sedative pentobarbital. Ricks was the second person executed in Texas this year and the sixth in the United States.

Ricks, 51, had been on death row since his conviction in 2014 for the killings of Roxann Sanchez and her eight-year-old son, Anthony Figueroa, in Bedford, Texas, a suburb in the greater Dallas-Fort Worth area, in May 2013. His execution proceeded despite serious, unresolved constitutional questions surrounding the conduct of his trial, questions that the courts refused to examine on their merits.

Prosecutors unlawfully excluded jurors

Central among the legal challenges raised by Ricks' attorneys was the allegation that prosecutors had unlawfully excluded minority jurors during his trial in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Notes prosecutors kept during jury selection—not obtained until 2021—showed that prosecutors singled out minority jurors for exclusion. This evidence formed the basis of an appeal that was denied by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2024.

The legal precedent at issue is *Batson v. Kentucky* (1986), in which the Supreme Court ruled that removing jurors based on their race is unconstitutional. Ricks' attorneys argued in their

petition to the Supreme Court that Ricks had already suspected during the trial that the state had singled out minority jurors. Despite the late-discovered prosecutorial notes lending credibility to that suspicion, no court agreed to examine the substance of the claim.

The U.S. Supreme Court denied Ricks' final application for a stay of execution on the day of his death. That application sought to overturn a March 4 ruling by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, which had denied his request for a stay on procedural grounds without reviewing the merits of the case. That the highest court in the land allowed a man to be executed while a credible racial discrimination claim went unexamined speaks volumes about the rush to execution in present-day America.

A separate appeal, also denied, raised constitutional concerns about Ricks having appeared before the jury in shackles. The Supreme Court had previously denied this appeal in 2025, despite its own previous ruling that presenting a defendant to a jury in shackles can unfairly influence sentencing.

At each turn, courts at every level refused to engage with the substance of Ricks' claims. The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals denied relief on procedural grounds; the Fifth Circuit denied his *Batson* appeal; the Supreme Court denied relief twice. At each stage, the machinery of the state advanced toward execution while substantive constitutional questions were left unaddressed.

This is a pattern long identified by death row opponents as one of the most insidious features of capital punishment in America: the procedural labyrinth that exhausts appeals not by resolving them but by foreclosing them. The result is that the state can

execute a person while maintaining the fiction that every legal avenue was explored—even when those avenues were blocked by technical barriers rather than answered on the merits.

Ricks, in his final statement in the execution chamber, directed his words not at the court system that had failed him but at the family of those he had harmed. He addressed seven relatives of his victims watching through a glass window and told them he was sorry for “taking Roxann and Anthony away from y’all,” adding that he hoped they could one day find forgiveness.

Death sentence commuted in Alabama

The same week Ricks was executed, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey commuted the sentence of Charles “Sonny” Burton, a 75-year-old man who had been on death row for more than three decades. Burton had been sentenced to death for the 1991 shooting death of Doug Battle, a customer killed during a robbery of an AutoZone store in Talladega. However, Burton was not even in the building when Battle was shot. Another man, Derrick DeBruce, pulled the trigger after Burton had already left the store. DeBruce had also originally been sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted to life in prison, but he died in 2020 while incarcerated.

Burton was scheduled to be executed by nitrogen gas on March 11, just days after Governor Ivey’s announcement. The victim’s own daughter had written to the governor urging clemency, asking how it could legally make sense to execute Burton. Multiple jurors from his 1992 trial also urged that his life be spared, including one juror who wrote publicly that she had been wrong to recommend the death penalty, saying she had not fully understood at the time that Burton was not inside the store when the murder occurred.

Ivey, a staunch supporter of capital punishment who has presided over 25 executions as governor, framed her decision in the narrowest possible terms—not as a rebuke of the death penalty but as a defense of its consistency. She said she could not proceed with the execution given the “disparate circumstances” of the case, and that it would be unjust for one participant in

the crime to be executed while the one who pulled the trigger was not. Ivey’s commutation was accompanied by an assurance to her pro-death penalty supporters that Burton would serve life in prison without any possibility of parole.

The response from Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall was telling. Rather than acknowledge the injustice, he attacked both Burton and the media for covering the case sympathetically, insisting that Burton bore full moral responsibility for the killing. Marshall claimed Burton had organized the robbery, pointed a gun at a store employee’s head and distributed the robbery’s proceeds afterward. His fury at the commutation speaks to a prosecutorial culture that treats the power to execute as an institutional prerogative to be defended, regardless of the proportionality of the sentence.

That a governor’s last-minute intervention was required to prevent what even the attorney general’s own office had at one point characterized as an “arguably unjust” execution only underscores the systemic failures built into the American capital punishment apparatus. Alabama’s use of nitrogen gas for executions has already drawn national scrutiny, and the Burton case drew renewed attention to how the felony murder rule—still on the books in 27 states—can result in a defendant being executed for a killing they did not commit and did not intend. It exposes the essential barbarity of capital punishment itself.

Eleven executions are scheduled for the remainder of 2026: 4 in Tennessee, 3 in Texas, 2 in Florida, 1 each in Oklahoma and Arizona.



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