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ORAL ARGUMENTS BEGIN TODAY FOR LANDMARK PAROLE CASE IN NJ SUPREME COURT

Court to determine if Parole Board violated former Black Panther's civil rights

TRENTON, NEW JERSEY — The New Jersey Supreme Court will hear oral arguments today at 10 a.m. ET in support of granting former Black Panther Sundiata Acoli parole. Acoli, age 85, has served nearly 49 years for the first-degree murder of a state trooper in 1973 during a shoot-out on the state turnpike.

The Court will decide if the parole board violated the law by denying Sundiata's petition for release. The proceedings will be visible to the press and public via the [New Jersey Courts website](#).

Sundiata was convicted of first-degree murder of a State Trooper during a shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike in 1973. He was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole until after 25 years served. He was first eligible for parole in 1999, but it was moved up to 1993 due to good behavior. That parole request was denied. He is in a federal prison in Cumberland, Maryland, despite his conviction at the state level. He has been denied parole eight times in total. Additional information about his case can be found [here](#).

New Jersey law states that a defendant who committed a crime before August 1997 be paroled unless the panel determines that the defendant poses a risk to public safety or presents a substantial risk of recidivism and therefore cannot be eligible for parole. The burden of proof rests with the state to provide evidence of that substantial risk.

The court will consider if the parole board's determination was arbitrary, capricious, or unreasonable? The standards to which the Parole Board makes determinations of risk came under criticism last year in a [scathing report by the state Office of the Public Defender](#).

"We are not asking the court for a favor and we are not asking the court for pity," said Soffiyah Elijah, former Harvard law instructor, social justice attorney and member of the Bring Sundiata Acoli Home Alliance. "We are asking the court to follow the law and apply it fairly and justly to Sundiata and to release him. It is more than time for him to be released."

Bruce Afran, Esq. is representing Sundiata. Three additional lawyers will argue on behalf of the amici (friends of the court) briefs filed in support of Sundiata:

- Joseph Russo, Esq. is representing the New Jersey Office of the Public Defender
- Alex Shalom, Esq. is representing the New Jersey Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union
- Raymond Brown Jr., Esq. of the law firm of Pashman Stein Walder Hayden P.C. is representing the New Jersey Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers

Sundiata is one of the oldest people incarcerated in the nation and his health continues to decline. He contracted Covid-19 in 2020, requiring hospitalization and continues to experience post-Covid health complications; it exacerbated his cardiovascular disease, hypertension, emphysema, and glaucoma. He is also experiencing dementia.

Additional information about Sundiata and his case can be found [here](#).

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