

Missouri executes murder convict with intellectual disability



Missouri Governor Mike Parsons and the US Supreme Court declined to grant clemency sought by former officials, legislators, and Pope Francis [Brynn Anderson/AP Photo]

Jefferson City, October 6 (RHC)-- The U.S. state of Missouri has executed Ernest Johnson, a 61-year-old Black man convicted of a 1994 triple murder case, despite his lawyers' arguments that overwhelming evidence showed he was intellectually disabled.

The execution, by lethal injection on Tuesday night, came after Missouri Governor Mike Parsons and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to grant clemency sought by former officials, legislators, and even Pope Francis.

The Vatican's envoy to the United States had sent a letter to Parsons on behalf of the Pope last week urging him to halt the "killing."

Two Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives from Missouri, Cori Bush and Emanuel Cleaver, also issued an appeal for clemency, saying Johnson's execution "would be a grave act of injustice." "Killing those who lack the intellectual ability to conform their behavior to the law is morally and legally unconscionable," they said in a statement.

"Like slavery and lynching did before it, the death penalty perpetuates cycles of trauma, violence and state-sanctioned murder in Black and brown communities."

Ernest was convicted of bludgeoning to death three convenience store employees using a hammer, a screwdriver and a gun during a botched robbery in Columbia, Missouri. His lawyers have repeatedly argued that because Johnson was born with fetal alcohol syndrome disorder, repeatedly scored within the range of intellectual disability on IQ tests and had the "daily living skills" of a four-year-old, his execution would constitute "cruel and unusual punishments", which are prohibited under the US constitution.

Former Missouri Governor Bob Holden had also voiced his opposition to the execution, despite his general support for the death penalty and the fact that 20 prisoners had been executed during his term.

In an op-ed for The Kansas City Star, he wrote that following a review of Johnson's history he agrees that the convicted man "certainly has intellectual and developmental disabilities."

"None of this excuses what Johnson did. But if our state is to be guided by the rule of law, we must temper our understandable anger with reason and compassion for the most vulnerable among us, including Ernest Johnson," he wrote.

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