

Florida Supreme Court overturns death sentences in grisly murder case

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TAMPA — The Florida Supreme Court on Thursday reversed the first-degree murder convictions and death sentence for a Hillsborough man charged with the 2002 killings of his wife and stepdaughter.

Khalid Ali Pasha, 66, won a new trial under unusual circumstances.

A unanimous court said he should have been allowed to represent himself during his 2007 trial rather than being forced to proceed with an attorney he tried to fire.

Circuit Judge William Fuente ruled at the time that Pasha's request to represent himself was equivocal, falling short of the standard required to allow him to serve as his own attorney.

Pasha had expressed a preference to have the assistance of a lawyer, just not the one assigned to him.

But the justices said the defendant's comments showed he understood that trial attorney Nick Sinardi was the only appointed counsel to which he was entitled.

"Faced with that reality, Pasha clearly expressed a desire to proceed pro se in order to avoid proceeding with counsel he found to be unacceptable," the opinion stated.

Sinardi and Fuente did not return calls for comment.

The ruling drew a strong reaction from the attorney who represented Pasha during the penalty phase of his trial.

"It's ridiculous to have somebody in Mr. Pasha's position represent himself," said lawyer Bob Fraser, who worked more than 300 hours on the case. "You can't fault the courts. The law is the law. And he has an absolute right to do it, but it's absolutely absurd."

Pasha, who spent decades in prison for robbing banks in Indiana and Kentucky, has a history of serving as his own attorney.

He previously had a life sentence vacated in an unrelated case.

In August 2002, Hillsborough authorities accused him of killing 43-year-old Robin Canady, his wife of less than one month, and her 20-year-old daughter, Ranesha Singleton.

Both women were stabbed, beaten and dragged in a cul-de-sac at the Woodlands Corporate Center on Waters Avenue, west of N Dale Mabry Highway. Their wounds indicated that they tried to defend themselves before their throats were fatally slit.

Witnesses saw a man wearing a bloody white hazmat suit and carrying a shiny object into nearby woods. A search of Pasha's van recovered a hazmat suit, a bloody knife and boots stained with the women's blood.

Pasha represented himself on and off leading up to his trial, even deposing some witnesses.

About a week before the trial, with Sinardi appointed to the case, Pasha asked for a new attorney. The defendant said he and Sinardi disagreed on an appropriate defense strategy.

Finding that Sinardi was providing effective assistance, Fuente denied that motion and subsequent requests Pasha made to represent himself.

"My life is at stake," Pasha said after opening statements. "You're throwing me to the wolves to allow this to continue as it is."

Jurors deliberated for less than 90 minutes before finding Pasha guilty. They recommended the death penalty in two 7-5 votes, and Fuente sentenced Pasha to death.

Thursday's ruling by the Supreme Court, which will send the case back to the trial level, made no findings as to Pasha's guilt.

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