

Serial: **222939**

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSISSIPPI

No. 2012-M-01775

DERRICK WILLIS

Petitioner

v.

STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

Respondent

EN BANC ORDER

Now before the en banc Court is Derrick Willis's "Application for Leave to Proceed in Trial Court with Post Conviction 99.39.27."

Willis was convicted of capital murder, armed robbery, and conspiracy; he was sentenced to two life terms and five years, respectively. *Williams v. State*, 794 So. 2d 1019, 1021 (Miss. 2001). This Court affirmed his convictions and sentences, and the mandate issued on October 11, 2001. *Id.* at 1029. Since then, Willis has filed three applications for leave to seek post-conviction relief in the trial court. Order, *Willis v. State*, 2003-M-01885 (Miss. Feb. 25, 2004); Order, *Willis v. State*, 2012-M-01775 (Miss. Feb. 13, 2013); Order, *Willis v. State*, 2012-M-01775 (Miss. Jan. 14, 2015).

Willis argues that his due-process and equal-protection rights were violated because no competency hearing was held. He claims the trial court ordered a mental examination, but that it did not occur. He also alleges newly discovered evidence: a single page from a mental-evaluation report that shows the person being evaluated had a full-scale IQ of 70.

A claim alleging a violation of one’s right not to be convicted while incompetent has been recognized as an exception to the successive-writ bars. *See Smith v. State*, 149 So. 3d 1027, 1031–32 (Miss. 2014), *overruled on other grounds by Pitchford v. State*, 240 So. 3d 1061 (Miss. 2017). But to warrant waiving that bar or the time and waiver bars, the claim must have some arguable basis. *Means v. State*, 43 So. 3d 438, 442 (Miss. 2010).

In addition, the procedural bars do not apply if a petitioner can show that he or she has “evidence, not reasonably discoverable at the time of trial, that is of such nature that it would be practically conclusive that, if it had been introduced at trial, it would have caused a different result in the conviction or sentence.” *Underwood v. State*, 37 So. 3d 10, 12 (Miss. 2010) (quoting Miss. Code Ann. § 99-39-27(9) (Supp. 2009)).

After due consideration, we find that Willis’s claims lack any arguable basis and do not meet the newly-discovered-evidence standard. Contrary to his assertions, the record shows that the trial court denied his motion for a psychological examination.

Willis has previously been warned that “future filings . . . which fail to meet an exception to the procedural bars may be deemed frivolous and may result in the imposition of appropriate sanctions.” Order, *Willis v. State*, 2012-M-01775 (Miss. Feb. 13, 2013). We again warn him that future filings deemed frivolous may result not only in monetary sanctions, but also in restrictions on filing applications for post-conviction relief (or pleadings in that nature) *in forma pauperis*. *See* Order, *Dunn v. State*, 2016-M-01514 (Miss. Nov. 15, 2018).

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that the application is denied.

SO ORDERED, this the 13th day of February, 2019.

/s/ Michael K. Randolph

MICHAEL K. RANDOLPH,
CHIEF JUSTICE
FOR THE COURT

TO DENY AND ISSUE SANCTIONS WARNING: RANDOLPH, C.J., AND ISHEE, J.

TO DISMISS AND ISSUE SANCTIONS WARNING: MAXWELL, BEAM AND
CHAMBERLIN, JJ.

TO DENY: KITCHENS AND KING, P.JJ., AND COLEMAN, J.

KING, P.J., OBJECTS TO THE ORDER IN PART WITH SEPARATE WRITTEN
STATEMENT JOINED BY KITCHENS, P.J.

GRIFFIS, J., NOT PARTICIPATING.

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**KING, PRESIDING JUSTICE, OBJECTING TO THE ORDER IN PART
WITH SEPARATE WRITTEN STATEMENT:**

¶1. Although Derrick Willis’s application for post-conviction relief does not merit relief, I disagree with the Court’s warning that future filings deemed frivolous may result in monetary sanctions or restrictions on filing applications for post-conviction collateral relief *in forma pauperis*.¹

¶2. This Court seems to tire of reading motions that it deems “frivolous” and imposes monetary sanctions on indigent defendants. The Court then bars those defendants, who in all likelihood are unable to pay the imposed sanctions, from future filings. In choosing to prioritize efficiency over justice, this Court forgets the oath that each justice took before assuming office. That oath stated in relevant part, “I . . . solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will administer justice without respect to persons, and do equal right to the poor and to the rich. . . .”

¹See Order, *Dunn v. State*, 2016-M-01514 (Miss. Nov. 15, 2018).

¶3. I disagree with this Court’s warning that future filings may result in additional monetary sanctions or in restrictions on filing applications for post-conviction collateral relief *in forma pauperis*. The imposition of monetary sanctions upon a criminal defendant proceeding *in forma pauperis* only serves to punish or preclude that defendant from his lawful right to appeal. Black’s Law Dictionary defines sanction as “[a] provision that gives force to a legal imperative by either rewarding obedience or *punishing disobedience*.” *Sanction*, Black’s Law Dictionary (10th ed. 2014) (emphasis added). Instead of punishing the defendant for filing a motion, I believe that this Court should simply deny or dismiss motions that lack merit. As Justice Brennan wisely stated,

The Court’s order purports to be motivated by this litigant’s disproportionate consumption of the Court’s time and resources. Yet if his filings are truly as repetitious as it appears, it hardly takes much time to identify them as such. I find it difficult to see how the amount of time and resources required to deal properly with McDonald’s petitions could be so great as to justify the step we now take. Indeed, the time that has been consumed in the preparation of the present order barring the door to Mr. McDonald far exceeds that which would have been necessary to process his petitions for the next several years at least. I continue to find puzzling the Court’s fervor in ensuring that rights granted to the poor are not abused, even when so doing actually increases the drain on our limited resources.

In re McDonald, 489 U.S. 180, 186–87, 109 S. Ct. 993, 997, 103 L. Ed. 2d 158 (1989) (per curiam).

¶4. The same logic applies to the restriction on filing subsequent applications for post-conviction relief. To cut off an indigent defendant’s right to proceed *in forma pauperis* is to cut off his access to the courts. This, in itself, violates a defendant’s constitutional rights, for

Among the rights recognized by the Court as being fundamental are the rights to be free from invidious racial discrimination, to marry, to practice their religion, to communicate with free persons, to have due process in disciplinary proceedings, and to be free from cruel and unusual punishment. As a result of the recognition of these and other rights, the right of access to courts, which is necessary to vindicate all constitutional rights, also became a fundamental right.

Joseph T. Lukens, *The Prison Litigation Reform Act: Three Strikes and You're Out of Court-It May Be Effective, but Is It Constitutional?*, 70 Temp. L. Rev. 471, 474–75 (1997).

This Court must not discourage convicted defendants from exercising their right to appeal.

Wisconsin v. Glick, 782 F.2d 670, 673 (7th Cir. 1986). Novel arguments that might remove a criminal defendant from confinement should not be discouraged by the threat of monetary sanctions and restrictions on filings. *Id.* As United States Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall stated,

In closing its doors today to another indigent litigant, the Court moves ever closer to the day when it leaves an indigent litigant with a meritorious claim out in the cold. And with each barrier that it places in the way of indigent litigants, and with each instance in which it castigates such litigants for having ‘abused the system,’ . . . the Court can only reinforce in the hearts and minds of our society’s less fortunate members the unsettling message that their pleas are not welcome here.

In re Demos, 500 U.S. 16, 19, 111 S. Ct. 1569, 1571, 114 L. Ed. 2d 20 (1991) (Marshall, J., dissenting).

¶5. Instead of simply denying or dismissing those motions that lack merit, the Court seeks to punish the defendant for the frequency of his motion filing. However, an individual who, even incorrectly, believes that she has been deprived of her freedom should not be expected

to sit silently by and wait to be forgotten. “Historically, the convictions with the best chances of being overturned were those that got *repeatedly reviewed on appeal* or those chosen by legal institutions such as the Innocence Project and the Center on Wrongful Convictions.” Emily Barone, *The Wrongly Convicted: Why More Falsely Accused People are Being Exonerated Today Than Ever Before*, Time, <http://time.com/wrongly-convicted/> (emphasis added). The Washington Post reports that

the average time served for the 1,625 exonerated individuals in the registry is more than nine years. Last year, three innocent murder defendants in Cleveland were exonerated 39 years after they were convicted—they spent their entire adult lives in prison—and even they were lucky: We know without doubt that the vast majority of innocent defendants who are convicted of crimes are never identified and cleared.

Samuel R. Gross, *The Staggering Number of Wrongful Convictions in America*, Wash. Post, July 24, 2015, http://wapo.st/1SGHcyd?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.4bed8ad6f2cc.

¶6. Rather than imposing sanctions and threatening to restrict access to the courts, I would simply dismiss or deny motions that lack merit. Therefore, although I find no merit in Willis’s application for post-conviction relief and agree it should be denied, I disagree with this Court’s warning of possible future sanctions and restrictions.

KITCHENS, P.J., JOINS THIS SEPARATE WRITTEN STATEMENT.