An Ex-Leader of Black Panthers Is Freed on Bail

By B. DRUMMOND AYRES JR.

LOS ANGELES, June 10 — To the chagrin of now-graying colleagues in the tumultuous 1960's, Elmer Pratt, a former Black Panther leader, was released on bail today after spending 27 years in prison on a murder conviction he says was concocted to destroy the Black Panther organization.

Mr. Pratt, known in civil rights circles as "Geronimo," was freed nearly after noon on a $25,000 bond his former Santa Ana jail judge who weeks ago overturned his conviction on the ground that prosecutors withheld crucial evidence long after he had been released on bail.

The truth is finally going to come out," Mr. Pratt, now 49, told a throng of reporters and well-wishers as he emerged from the Santa Ana jail, for the first time in more than a judge rules that prosecutors withheld evidence in a murder trial.

But the prosecutors did not tell the jury the full story of the 60's, accused the Nixon administration of "trying to kill us all" and asserted that even today the country's jails are packed with the unjustly accused.

"You have political prisoners on top of political prisoners," Mr. Pratt said. "I'm only one of a great many that should be addressed."

Mr. Hilliard, the founder of the Panthers and now the director of a San Francisco-area foundation named after Huey Newton, a former Black Panther, called Mr. Pratt's release "a victory for black America" and "a good day for America." Mr. Pratt's lawyers, as well as such former Panther leaders as Eldridge Cleaver and David Hilliard, someone began to chant: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty he's free at last!"

Mr. Pratt, still very much talking the talk of the 60's, accused the Nixon administration of "tried to use our civil rights and our political party." He was framed by the F.B.I., no doubt about it, because we were a party of young blacks," Mr. Pratt said of Mr. Pratt. "The Black Panther Party doesn't exist any more but its legacy lives on. We're not terrorists. We're not bombers. We're a political party."

Mr. Cleaver, author of "Soul on Ice," and now a graying 61-year-old who had been recruited to infiltrate and spy on the Black Panther party, told the judge yesterday after 27 years in prison, the conviction he says was concocted to destroy the Black Panther Party and other similar groups that were pushing for black empowerment in the 1960's.

The prosecutors did not tell the court that Mr. Butler, a sometime rival of Mr. Pratt for power within the Panther organization, was a convicted felion who had been recruited to infiltrate the Panthers. The jury chose to believe Mr. Butler and Mr. Pratt was found guilty and given a sentence of 25 years to life in prison.

One of his lawyers then, as now, was Johnnie Cochran, the Los Angeles criminal lawyer who also represented O. J. Simpson.

In half a dozen or more appeal efforts, Mr. Pratt insisted that he was innocent. He said the police, particularly agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had framed him as they sought to infiltrate and destroy the Black Panther Party and other similar groups that were pushing for black empowerment in the 1960's. Law-enforcement officials maintained that the groups were subversive and often resorted to violence in an effort to achieve their goals.

Mr. Pratt initially was tried in a Los Angeles County court. But once he began to argue in his appeals that the fairness of the Los Angeles court system was itself at issue, his case was transferred to the Orange County system.

When Judge Dickey approved Mr. Pratt's release today, Mr. Pratt praised him effusively. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your fair and courageous ruling," Mr. Pratt said, his voice husky with emotion.