Bill Cosby to be freed today as court overturns sexual assault conviction

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A US court overturned comedian Bill Cosby‘s conviction for drugging and sexually assaulting a woman 15 years ago on Wednesday, allowing his release from prison, in a blow to the #MeToo movement.  
  
“Cosby’s convictions and judgment of sentence are vacated, and he is discharged,” the Pennsylvania Supreme Court wrote in a 79-page ruling.  
  
The 83-year-old, shattered racial barriers with his Emmy-winning role on “I Spy” in the 1960s, and then as a dad and doctor on the hit TV series “The Cosby Show” two decades later.  
  
But he suffered a fall from grace as allegations of sexual misconduct emerged against him, and was convicted in 2018 of assaulting Andrea Constand at his Philadelphia mansion in 2004.  
  
It was the first guilty verdict for sexual assault against a celebrity since the advent of the worldwide reckoning against sexual violence and abuse of power dubbed the #MeToo movement.  
  
Cosby has served more than two years of a three-to-ten-year sentence for aggravated indecent assault.  
  
It was not immediately clear when he would be released.  
  
“We will need to receive, authenticate and review the court documents before we move forward,” a spokesperson for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections told AFP.  
  
An earlier prosecution ended in a mistrial in June 2017 after the jury was unable to reach a unanimous verdict.  
  
Although more than 60 women charged that they had been victims of sexual assault by Cosby, he was tried criminally only for Constand’s assault, since the statute of limitations had expired in the other cases.  
  
‘Fundamentally unfair’ –  
  
He filed his second appeal against his conviction in August last year.  
  
His lawyers argued that five women should not have been allowed to give evidence at his trial as witnesses.  
  
They complained that their “decades-old” allegations, which were not part of the charges, had prejudiced the jury.  
  
The prosecutors had put them on the stand to convince the jury that Cosby had displayed a pattern of drugging and assaulting women.  
  
The attorneys also argued it was “fundamentally unfair” that deposition testimony Cosby gave in a civil case regarding his use of sedative drugs and his sexual behaviors in the 1970s was heard in court.  
  
They argue that Cosby believed the testimony was immune from prosecution when he gave it.  
  
The Pennsylvania Supreme Court agreed that Cosby had been denied a fair trial.  
  
“He must be discharged, and any future prosecution on these particular charges must be barred,” three justices wrote.  
  
“We do not dispute that this remedy is both severe and rare. But it is warranted here, indeed compelled,” they added.  
  
Cosby had lost an earlier appeal when a court ruled that the prosecution’s evidence had established Cosby’s “unique sexual assault playbook.”  
  
A dozen women who say they were victims of Cosby have filed civil suits against the actor seeking compensation for damages.  
  
(AFP)