

No. _____

In the
Supreme Court of the United States

Jose Luis Morales-Huerta,

Petitioner,

v.

United States of America,

Respondent.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari
to the United States Court of Appeals
for the Fifth Circuit

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

- I. Whether all facts—including the fact of a prior conviction—that increase a defendant’s statutory maximum must be pleaded in the indictment and either admitted by the defendant or proven to a jury beyond a reasonable doubt?

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING

Petitioner is Jose Luis Morales-Huerta, who was the Defendant-Appellant in the court below. Respondent, the United States of America, was the Plaintiff-Appellee in the court below.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED	i
PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
INDEX TO APPENDICES	iv
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES	v
PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI	1
OPINIONS BELOW	1
JURISDICTION.....	1
STATUTORY AND RULES PROVISIONS	1
LIST OF PROCEEDINGS BELOW	3
STATEMENT OF THE CASE.....	4
REASON FOR GRANTING THIS PETITION	7
CONCLUSION.....	12

INDEX TO APPENDICES

Appendix A Opinion of Fifth Circuit

Appendix B Judgment and Sentence of the United States District Court for the
Northern District of Texas Dist. Court 3:22-CR-481

Appendix C Judgment and Sentence of the United States District Court for the
Northern District of Texas Dist. Court 3:23-CR-063

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	Page(s)
Federal Cases	
<i>Alleyne v. United States</i> , 133 S. Ct. 2151 (2013)	7, 9, 11
<i>Almendarez-Torres v. United States</i> , 523 U.S. 224 (1998)	6-11
<i>Apprendi v. New Jersey</i> , 530 U.S. 466 (2000)	7-11
<i>Blakely v. Washington</i> , 542 U.S. 296 (2004)	8
<i>Cunningham v. California</i> , 549 U.S. 270 (2007)	10
<i>Descamps v. United States</i> , 133 S. Ct. 2276 (2013)	7
<i>Dretke v. Haley</i> , 541 U.S. 386 (2004)	8
<i>James v. United States</i> , 550 U.S. 192 (2007)	8
<i>Nijhawan v. Holder</i> , 129 S.Ct. 2294 (2009)	8
<i>Rangel-Reyes v. United States</i> , 547 U.S. 1200 (2006)	8
<i>United States v. Shepard</i> , 544 U.S. 13 (2005)	7, 8, 10
Federal Statutes	
8 U.S.C. § 1326.....	1, 2, 7
8 U.S.C. § 1326(b)	6, 7, 8
18 U.S.C. § 2250(a)	4

28 U.S.C. § 1254(1)	1
USSG § 2A3.5(a)(2)	5
USSG § 2L1.2(a)	5
USSG § 3D1.2	5
USSG § 3D1.3(a)	5
USSG § 3D1.3(b)	5
USSG § 3D1.3(c)	5
USSG § 4A1.1(a)	5

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioner Jose Luis Morales-Huerta seeks a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the Court of Appeals was not published but is available at *United States v. Jose Luis Morales-Huerta*, Nos. 24-10010 & 24-10011, 2024 WL 4471739 (5th Cir. Oct. 11, 2024). It is reprinted in Appendix A to this Petition. The district court's judgments and sentences are attached as Appendices B and C.

JURISDICTION

The panel opinion and judgment of the Fifth Circuit were entered on August 23, 2024, 2024.

This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

STATUTORY AND RULES PROVISIONS

This Petition involves 8 U.S.C. § 1326, which states:

(a) In general. Subject to subsection (b), any alien who—

(1) has been denied admission, excluded, deported, or removed or has departed the United States while an order of exclusion, deportation, or removal is outstanding, and thereafter

(2) enters, attempts to enter, or is at any time found in, the United States, unless (A) prior to his reembarkation at a place outside the United States or his application for admission from foreign contiguous territory, the Attorney General has expressly consented to such alien's reapplying for admission; or (B) with respect to an alien previously denied admission and removed, unless such alien shall establish that he was not required to obtain such advance consent under this or any prior Act, shall be fined under title 18, United States Code, or imprisoned not more than 2 years or both.

(b) Criminal penalties for reentry of certain removed aliens.
Notwithstanding subsection (a), in the case of any alien described in such subsection--

(1) whose removal was subsequent to a conviction for commission of three or more misdemeanors involving drugs, crimes against the person, or both, or a felony (other than an aggravated felony), such alien shall be fined under title 18, United States Code, imprisoned not more than 10 years, or both;

(2) whose removal was subsequent to a conviction for commission of an aggravated felony, such alien shall be fined under such title, imprisoned not more than 20 years, or both;

(3) who has been excluded from the United States pursuant to section 235(c) [8 USCS § 1225(c)] because the alien was excludable under section 212(a)(3)(B) [8 USCS § 1182(a)(3)(B)] or who has been removed from the United States pursuant to the provisions of title V [8 USCS §§ 1531 et seq.], and who thereafter, without the permission of the Attorney General, enters the United States, or attempts to do so, shall be fined under title 18, United States Code, and imprisoned for a period of 10 years, which sentence shall not run concurrently with any other sentence.[.] or

(4) who was removed from the United States pursuant to section 241(a)(4)(B) [8 USCS § 1231(a)(4)(B)] who thereafter, without the permission of the Attorney General, enters, attempts to enter, or is at any time found in, the United States (unless the Attorney General has expressly consented to such alien's reentry) shall be fined under title 18, United States Code, imprisoned for not more than 10 years, or both.

8 U.S.C. § 1326.

LIST OF PROCEEDINGS BELOW

1. *United States v. Jose Luis Morales-Huerta*, 3:22-CR-481, United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas. Judgment and sentence entered on January 3, 2024. (Appendix B).
2. *United States v. Jose Luis Morales-Huerta*, 3:23-CR-63, United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas. Judgment and sentence entered on January 3, 2024. (Appendix C).
3. *United States v. Jose Luis Morales-Huerta*, Nos. 24-10010 & 24-10011, 2024 WL 4471739 (5th Cir. Oct. 11, 2024), Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. Judgment affirmed on October 11, 2024. (Appendix A).

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On December 21, 2022, the government indicted Mr. Morales-Huerta on one count of Illegal Reentry After Deportation, in violation of § 1326(a) and (b)(1). (ROA.23-24)(case 24-10010). The indictment alleged:

On or about November 20, 2022, in the Dallas Division of the Northern District of Texas, the defendant, Jose Luis Morales-Huerta, an alien, was found in the United States after having been deported and removed therefrom on or about April 6, 2015, without having received the express consent of the Attorney General or the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security to reapply for admission since the time of the defendant's previous deportation and removal.

(ROA.23)(case 24-10010). There were no allegations of any of the enhancement provisions under the statute that would raise the statutory maximum above two years of imprisonment or allow for a term of supervised release in excess of one year. *See* (ROA.23-24)(case 24-10010). On February 7, 2023, he pleaded guilty to the one-count indictment. (ROA.76-91)(case 24-10010).

Later, Mr. Morales-Huerta was charged in a separate one-count indictment with Failure to Register as a Sex Offender, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2250(a). (ROA.10-11)(case 24-10011). He pleaded guilty to that indictment on August 21, 2023. (ROA.99-123)(case 24-10011).

A Presentence Investigation Report (PSR) was prepared for Mr. Morales-Huerta's sentencing for both offenses. *Compare* (ROA.92-111)(case 24-10010), *with*

(ROA.172-191)(case 24-10011).¹ In calculating the offense level, the PSR first concluded that the two counts could not be grouped under the grouping rules of USSG §3D1.2, because they did not involve substantially the same harm. (ROA.180). First, regarding the Illegal Reentry case, the PSR applied a base offense level of eight under USSG §2L1.2(a), to which a ten-level increase applied under USSG §4A1.1(a) because, prior to his earlier deportation, Mr. Morales-Huerta had been convicted of a felony offense (other than illegal reentry) for which he received a sentence of longer than five years. (ROA.180). This made Mr. Morales-Huerta's adjusted offense level for the first group total 18. (ROA.181). The second group's adjusted offense level was 14, consisting solely of a base offense level of 14 under USSG §2A3.5(a)(2). (ROA.181). These two groups accounted for a total of two units under the rules of USSG §3D1.3(a), (b), and (c). (ROA.181-82). These two units caused two offense level points to be added to the adjusted offense level of 18 for group one (the greater of the two groups' adjusted offense levels), which resulted in Mr. Morales having a combined adjusted offense level of 20. (ROA.182). After three levels of reduction for acceptance of responsibility, Mr. Morales-Huerta's total offense level was 17. (ROA.182).

Mr. Morales-Huerta raised three objections to the PSR. (ROA.192-96). Included in these objections was an argument that the defendant's statutory maximum punishment for the illegal reentry case should be two years' imprisonment

¹ The record for case 24-10011 is more robust than that for 24-10010, as it includes the transcript of the sentencing hearing both cases. *See generally* (ROA.123-71)(no. 24-10011). For simplicity, from this point forward, all citations to Mr. Morales-Huerta's PSR or sentencing hearing will cite only to the EROA for case 24-10011, unless otherwise noted.

and one year of supervision because the government did not allege in the indictment or prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he had violated the elements of 8 U.S.C. § 1326(b), although he acknowledged that this objection appeared foreclosed by *Almendarez-Torres v. United States*, 523 U.S. 224 (1998). (ROA.194-96). Although the district court entertained arguments regarding this issue by both parties during the sentencing hearing, the district court overruled the objection. (ROA.136-44).

Regarding the illegal reentry case, the district court sentenced Mr. Morales-Huerta to 30 months' imprisonment and three years of supervised release. (ROA.64-65)(case 24-10010).

On appeal, Petitioner argued that the district court erred by imposing a sentence exceeding two years of imprisonment and one year of supervised release of more than one year because the fact of his prior conviction was neither in the indictment nor proven to a jury beyond a reasonable doubt, although he admitted that the position was foreclosed by *Almendarez-Torres v. United States*, 523 U.S. 224, 235 (1998). The Fifth Circuit rejected the argument because it is foreclosed by controlling precedent. See [Appendix A, at *1-2].

REASON FOR GRANTING THIS PETITION

I. The Court should hold the instant Petition pending any plenary grant of certiorari addressing the question presented.

A. The Court should reconsider *Almendarez-Torres v. United States*.

Petitioner was subjected to an enhanced statutory maximum under 8 U.S.C. §1326(b) because the removal charged in the indictment followed a prior aggravated felony conviction. Petitioner's sentence thus depends on the judge's ability to find the existence and date of a prior conviction and to use that date to increase the statutory maximum. It further depends on the judge's power to enhance a defendant's sentence beyond the statutory maximum on the basis of facts that have not been pleaded in the indictment. This power was affirmed in *Almendarez-Torres v. United States*, 523 U.S. 224 (1998), which held that the enhanced maximums of 8 U.S.C. § 1326 represent sentencing factors rather than elements of an offense and that they may be constitutionally determined by judges rather than juries. *See Almendarez-Torres*, 523 U.S. at 244.

This Court, however, has repeatedly limited *Almendarez-Torres*. *See Alleyne v. United States*, 133 S. Ct. 2151, 2160 n.1 (2013) (characterizing *Almendarez-Torres* as a narrow exception to the general rule that all facts that increase punishment must be alleged in the indictment and proved to a jury beyond a reasonable doubt); *Descamps v. United States*, 133 S. Ct. 2276, 2295 (Thomas, J., concurring) (stating that *Almendarez-Torres* should be overturned); *Apprendi v. New Jersey*, 530 U.S. 466, 490 (2000) (stressing that *Almendarez-Torres* represented “a narrow exception” to the prohibition on judicial fact-finding to increase a defendant's sentence); *United States*

v. Shepard, 544 U.S. 13 (2005) (Souter, J., controlling plurality opinion) (“While the disputed fact here can be described as a fact about a prior conviction, it is too far removed from the conclusive significance of a prior judicial record, and too much like the findings subject to *Jones* and *Apprendi*, to say that *Almendarez-Torres* clearly authorizes a judge to resolve the dispute.”); *Dretke v. Haley*, 541 U.S. 386, 395-396 (2004) (concluding that the application of *Almendarez-Torres* to the *sequence* of a defendant’s prior convictions represented a difficult constitutional question to be avoided if possible); *Nijhawan v. Holder*, 129 S.Ct. 2294, 2302 (2009) (agreeing with the Solicitor General that the loss amount of a prior offense would represent an element of an 8 U.S.C. §1326(b) offense, to the extent that it boosted the defendant’s statutory maximum).

Further, any number of opinions, some authored by Justices among the *Almendarez-Torres* majority, have expressed doubt about whether it was correctly decided. *See Apprendi*, 530 U.S. at 490; *Haley*, 541 U.S. at 395-396; *Shepard*, 544 U.S. at 26 & n.5 (Souter, J., controlling plurality opinion); *Shepard*, 544 U.S. at 26-28 (Thomas, J., concurring); *Rangel-Reyes v. United States*, 547 U.S. 1200, 1201 (Stevens, J., concurring in denial of certiorari); *Rangel-Reyes*, 547 U.S. at 1202-1203 (Thomas, J., dissenting from denial of certiorari); *James v. United States*, 550 U.S. 192, 231-232 (2007) (Thomas, J., dissenting). And this Court has also repeatedly cited authorities as exemplary of the original meaning of the constitution that do not recognize a distinction between prior convictions and facts about the instant offense. *See Blakely v. Washington*, 542 U.S. 296, 301-302 (2004) (quoting W. Blackstone,

Commentaries on the Laws of England 343 (1769), 1 J. Bishop, Criminal Procedure § 87, p 55 (2d ed. 1872)); *Apprendi*, 530 U.S. at 478-479 (quoting J. Archbold, Pleading and Evidence in Criminal Cases 44 (15th ed. 1862), 4 Blackstone 369-370).

In *Alleyne*, this Court applied *Apprendi*'s rule to mandatory minimum sentences, holding that any fact that produces a higher sentencing range—not just a sentence above the mandatory maximum—must be proved to a jury beyond a reasonable doubt. 133 S. Ct. at 2162–63. In its opinion, the Court apparently recognized that *Almendarez-Torres*'s holding remains subject to Fifth and Sixth Amendment attack. *Alleyne* characterized *Almendarez-Torres* as a “narrow exception to the general rule” that all facts that increase punishment must be alleged in the indictment and proved to a jury beyond a reasonable doubt. *Id.* at 2160 n.1. But because the parties in *Alleyne* did not challenge *Almendarez-Torres*, this Court said that it would “not revisit it for purposes of [its] decision today.” *Id.*

The Court's reasoning nevertheless demonstrates that *Almendarez-Torres*'s recidivism exception may be overturned. *Alleyne* traced the treatment of the relationship between crime and punishment, beginning in the Eighteenth Century, repeatedly noting how “[the] linkage of facts with particular sentence ranges . . . reflects the intimate connection between crime and punishment.” *Id.* at 2159 (“[i]f a fact was by law essential to the penalty, it was an element of the offense”); *see id.* (historically, crimes were defined as “the whole of the wrong to which the law affixes [] punishment ... includ[ing] any fact that annexes a higher degree of punishment”) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted); *id.* at 2160 (“the indictment must

contain an allegation of every fact which is legally essential to the punishment to be inflicted”) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). This Court concluded that, because “the whole of the” crime and its punishment cannot be separated, the elements of a crime must include any facts that increase the penalty. The Court recognized no limitations or exceptions to this principle.

Alleyne’s emphasis that the elements of a crime include the “whole” of the facts for which a defendant is punished seriously undercuts the view, expressed in *Almendarez-Torres*, that recidivism is different from other sentencing facts. See *Almendarez-Torres*, 523 U.S. at 243–44; see also *Apprendi*, 530 U.S. at 490 (“Other than the fact of a prior conviction, any fact that increases the penalty for a crime beyond the prescribed statutory maximum must be submitted to a jury, and proved beyond a reasonable doubt.”). *Apprendi* tried to explain this difference by pointing out that, unlike other facts, recidivism “does not relate to the commission of the offense’ itself[.]” 530 U.S. at 496 (quoting *Almendarez-Torres*, 523 U.S. at 230). But this Court did not appear committed to that distinction; it acknowledged that *Almendarez-Torres* might have been “incorrectly decided.” *Id.* at 489; see also *Shepard v. United States*, 544 U.S. 13, 26 n.5 (2005) (acknowledging that Court’s holding in that case undermined *Almendarez-Torres*); *Cunningham v. California*, 549 U.S. 270, 291 n.14 (2007) (rejecting invitation to distinguish between “facts concerning the offense, where *Apprendi* would apply, and facts [like recidivism] concerning the offender, where it would not,” because “*Apprendi* itself ... leaves no room for the bifurcated approach”).

Three concurring justices in *Alleyne* provide additional reason to believe that the time is ripe to revisit *Almendarez-Torres*. See *Alleyne*, 133 S. Ct. at 2164 (Sotomayor, Ginsburg, Kagan, J.J., concurring). Those justices noted that the viability of the Sixth Amendment principle set forth in *Apprendi* was initially subject to some doubt, and some justices believed the Court “might retreat” from it. *Id.* at 2165. Instead, *Apprendi*’s rule “has become even more firmly rooted in the Court’s Sixth Amendment jurisprudence.” *Id.* Reversal of precedent is warranted when “the reasoning of [that precedent] has been thoroughly undermined by intervening decisions.” *Id.* at 2166.

The validity of *Almendarez-Torres* is accordingly subject to reasonable doubt. If *Almendarez-Torres* is overruled, the result will obviously undermine the use of Petitioner’s prior conviction to increase his statutory maximum term of supervised release. He has received a 30-month incarceration sentence and a three-year term of supervised release; thus, the matter cannot become moot during the pendency of the case.

CONCLUSION

Petitioner respectfully submits that this Court should grant *certiorari* to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

Respectfully submitted this 7th day of January, 2025.

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