

Title: Philippine Navy Golf Club, Inc., The Philippine Navy, and The Philippine Navy Flag Officer-in-Command vs. Merardo C. Abaya, Angelito P. Maglonzo, Ruben I. Foloso, and Elias B. Sta. Clara

Facts:

In 1957, the Fort William McKinley, later renamed as the Fort Andres Bonifacio Military Reservation, was established by President Carlos Garcia. Eight years later, President Diosdado Macapagal issued Proclamation No. 461, excluding a portion from the reservation and declaring it the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Officer's Village, making it available for disposition under existing laws meant for public land. In 1976, the Philippine Navy developed a part of the village into a golf course and operation was later entrusted to the Philippine Navy Golf Club, Inc. Subsequently, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) awarded lots within this area to retired military officers, including respondents Abaya, Maglonzo, Foloso, and Sta. Clara, between 1996 and 1998. However, these officers were unable to take possession due to the existing golf course.

Respondents Abaya et al. then filed an accion reivindicatoria against the Philippine Navy and the Golf Club, claiming possession of their lawfully awarded land parcels. The Navy and Golf Club objected, invoking an exclusionary clause in Proclamation No. 461 that stated land earmarked for public or quasi-public purposes was not subject to disposition. They also claimed sovereign immunity as a defense against the suit. The RTC ruled in favor of Abaya et al., ordering the respondents to vacate the lands and pay rental fees. The CA affirmed the RTC's decision, which led the Navy and the Golf Club to elevate the case to the Supreme Court on the grounds of public land classification and sovereign immunity.

Issues:

1. Whether the land developed into a golf course by the Philippine Navy falls within the alienable and disposable portion of the public land under Proclamation No. 461.
2. If the land is alienable and disposable, whether respondents are entitled to possession of the lots awarded to them.
3. Whether the Philippine Navy can invoke the doctrine of non-suability to avoid the ruling granted by the lower courts.
4. Whether the orders of award to Abaya et al. were invalid in light of the subsequent denial of the sale of lands within the military reservation under Memorandum Order No. 172.

Court's Decision:

1. The Court found that the area wherein the Philippine Navy Golf Course is situated

remains part of the alienable and disposable public land of the AFP Officers' Village. It was unilaterally decided by the Navy to establish a golf course without a proclamation to reclassify the land for such purpose. Thus, respondents' entitlement to the land was upheld.

2. The Court declared that the orders of award were validly issued in favor of Abaya et al., and the objections against them were not relevant in the context of the present reivindicatory action and were not proven to substantiate the claims.

3. The Court deemed that the Philippine Navy could not invoke state immunity because it would lead to injustice since it does not have an overriding public need for the land, which was intended for residential use by retired military personnel.

4. As for Memorandum Order No. 172, the Court observed it was inapplicable because it prohibited the issuance of deeds of sale, not orders of award, and hence did not invalidate the awards to Abaya et al.

Doctrine:

The main doctrines established or reiterated by this decision include:

1. The doctrine of non-suability of the State, which the Court clarified cannot be used to perpetrate an injustice, particularly when a public entity transgresses private property rights without the due process of law or just compensation.
2. The principle regarding classification of public lands, wherein lands already declared alienable and disposable cannot later be unilaterally reclassified by a public entity without a presidential proclamation.
3. The affirmation of the validity of orders of award, issued in accordance with relevant laws, for public land disposition, despite subsequent conflicting memoranda provided the former was not directly contravened.

Historical Background:

The case is situated within a broader historical context of the transformation of military reservations in the Philippines, from primarily military use to inclusion of residential zones for retired military personnel. The shifting directives under various administrative memoranda and proclamations illustrate the evolving policy considerations of the Philippine government regarding the use and disposition of such lands. The Supreme Court's decision highlights the tension between state sovereignty and individual property rights, underscoring the necessity to uphold the latter when the state's exercise of power transgresses established legal norms without legitimate justification.