

Title: Republic of the Philippines v. Maria Lourdes P. A. Sereno

Facts:

Maria Lourdes P. A. Sereno (respondent) was appointed as the 24th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Philippines by then-President Benigno Aquino III on August 24, 2012. The appointment came after the impeachment of her predecessor, Chief Justice Renato Corona.

On March 2, 2018, the Republic of the Philippines, represented by Solicitor General Jose C. Calida (petitioner), filed a petition for quo warranto against Sereno before the Supreme Court, asserting that Sereno was ineligible to hold the office of Chief Justice, alleging her failure to meet the integrity requirement due to her supposed failure to file several Statements of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALNs) during her tenure as a professor at the University of the Philippines (UP).

The Supreme Court en banc, after considering the petitions, motions, and following a thorough discussion of the pertinent issues during the oral arguments, rendered a landmark Decision dated May 11, 2018, granting the petition for quo warranto and ousting Sereno as Chief Justice. Sereno filed a motion for reconsideration, which is the subject of this analysis.

Issues:

1. Whether the Supreme Court has jurisdiction to oust an impeachable officer through quo warranto.
2. Whether Sereno was denied due process in the proceedings before the Court.
3. Whether the official acts of the Judicial and Bar Council (JBC) and the President involve political questions that cannot be annulled absent any allegation of grave abuse of discretion.
4. Whether the petition for quo warranto is time-barred.
5. Whether Sereno's non-submission of SALNs to the JBC affects her qualification as a person of proven integrity and consequently her eligibility for appointment to the Judiciary.

Court's Decision:

The Supreme Court found no reason to reverse its earlier Decision. The primary issues were discussed systematically:

1. Jurisdiction - The Court reaffirmed its authority to decide the quo warranto action, citing Section 5, Article VIII of the Constitution, which grants the Supreme Court original jurisdiction over petitions for quo warranto. The Court reasoned that the Constitution does

not limit the Court's quo warranto jurisdiction only to certain public officials and does not exclude impeachable officials. The Court distinguished between quo warranto and impeachment and clarified that quo warranto concerns eligibility or the validity of the appointment, whereas impeachment determines whether the impeachable officer committed any impeachable offenses.

2. Denial of Due Process - The Court rejected Sereno's claim that she was denied due process. It found that she actively participated in the proceedings, making several representations before the Court, and was heard both in person and through counsel. Additionally, her allegations on the bias of Justices were speculative and without substantial basis; her claims on the impartiality of certain Justices were dismissed on similar grounds.

3. Political Questions - The Court held that while the JBC and the President exercise discretion in their respective functions, the determination of whether a nominee possesses the requisite qualifications is based on facts and does not involve political questions. The Court concluded that it has jurisdiction to inquire into the qualification issues, and these issues are not so discretionary as to render the JBC's decision immune from judicial review.

4. Prescription - The Court clarified that the one-year prescriptive period under Section 11, Rule 66 of the Rules of Court does not apply to the State when it is the one initiating the quo warranto proceedings. Moreover, it stated that the unique circumstances of Sereno's case preclude the strict application of the prescriptive period.

5. Integrity Requirement - The Court maintained that the requirement of "proven integrity" forms a condition precedent for appointment to the Judiciary. It was found that Sereno's repeated failure to file her SALN and non-submission thereof to the JBC, which the latter required, affected her integrity. Consequently, this failure to demonstrate integrity led the Court to conclude that Sereno failed to meet the constitutional requirements of the position.

#### Doctrine:

The Supreme Court holds the power under the Constitution to exercise original jurisdiction over petitions for quo warranto, including against impeachable officers. An impeachable officer's eligibility for their position and the validity of their appointment are justiciable issues that can be reviewed in a quo warranto proceeding. As such, the Court can act upon quo warranto to question the validity of appointments, especially of impeachable officers, owing to its mandate to ensure compliance with constitutional requirements for public office.

Class Notes:

- Public office as a public trust: The qualifications and integrity of individuals appointed to public office are matters of public concern and subject to scrutiny under the law.
- Eligibility for judicial appointment: To be eligible for a judicial appointment, a candidate must demonstrate competence, integrity, probity, and independence, which must be established by evidence, including a consistent record of SALN filings.
- Quo warranto jurisdiction: The Supreme Court has the power to decide on quo warranto petitions concerning public office, including the offices of impeachable officers.
- Impeachment vs. quo warranto: Impeachment proceedings pertain to the removal of a public officer based on impeachable offenses committed during the officer's incumbency, while quo warranto involves the eligibility of an officer at the time of appointment, based on constitutional and lawful requirements.
- Prescriptive periods: Statutory limits for initiating actions do not apply to the State when it is the party bringing the action, ensuring that public interests are prioritized and not hampered by technicalities.
- Judicial discretion on matters of inhibition: Judges and Justices have the discretion to inhibit themselves from cases in which they believe their impartiality might reasonably be questioned. However, bias or partiality must be substantiated with clear and convincing evidence.

Historical Background:

The case demonstrates an instance where the high office of the Chief Justice was subjected to legal scrutiny through a quo warranto petition, a rare occurrence in Philippine jurisprudence. The use of quo warranto to challenge the qualifications of a sitting Chief Justice raised significant questions about the extent of the Judiciary's reach into the appointments of public officials, the mechanisms for upholding constitutional requirements in such appointments, and the balance between judicial review and the protections offered to impeachable officials. The decision thus contributes to an ongoing dialogue regarding the accountability of public officers, the role of constitutional bodies like the JBC, and the interpretation of the Constitution in matters of public trust and governance.