

Title: In the Matter of the Urgent Petition for the Release of Prisoners on Humanitarian Grounds in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Facts: On April 6, 2020, a group of detainees, represented by their relatives, filed a petition before the Philippine Supreme Court, seeking temporary liberty on humanitarian grounds due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The petitioners, detained on various charges, cited their vulnerability to COVID-19 in the congested prison system, arguing that their continued detention posed a high risk of contracting the virus. They emphasized the impossibility of implementing social distancing and self-isolation measures in jails. Petitioners proposed their release either on recognizance or bail and the formation of a “Prisoner Release Committee” to oversee the release process, similar to measures adopted by other countries.

The government, represented by the Office of the Solicitor General, opposed the petition, arguing that the petitioners, alleged members of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF), had committed heinous crimes and were exploiting the pandemic to gain provisional liberty. The government also assured that adequate measures were in place in detention facilities to protect inmates from COVID-19 and highlighted efforts to decongest jails following the Supreme Court’s guidelines. The Solicitor General further contended that the petition violated the doctrine of hierarchy of courts and involved questions of fact better assessed by trial courts.

Issues:

- I. Whether or not the instant petition filed directly before the Supreme Court may be given due course.
- II. Whether or not the Nelson Mandela Rules are enforceable in Philippine courts.
- III. Whether or not petitioners may be given provisional liberty on the ground of equity.
- IV. Whether or not the Court has the power to address the State’s methods in handling the pandemic in detention facilities.

Court’s Decision:

The Supreme Court unanimously decided to treat the petition as the petitioners’ applications for bail or recognizance, as well as their motions for other practicable confinement arrangements, and referred these to the respective trial courts with directions to conduct necessary proceedings with utmost dispatch. The Court clarified that it is not the proper forum for the determination of factual issues present in the case, such as the assessment of the risk posed by COVID-19 in jails and the appropriateness of releasing particular detainees. This decision stemmed from the principle that bail and recognizance

are matters of discretion for trial courts based on the assessment of evidence presented during summary hearings.

Doctrine: The Supreme Court emphasized that it is not a trier of facts and reiterated the doctrine that questions of bail and recognizance, especially for offenses punishable by reclusion perpetua where evidence of guilt is strong, are best determined by trial courts through summary hearings.

Class Notes:

1. **Procedural Posture:** The procedure to be followed in seeking provisional liberty on the ground of health or humanitarian reasons involves filing a petition or motion before the proper trial court rather than the Supreme Court, following the principle of hierarchy of courts.
2. **Bail and Recognizance:** The entitlement to bail is not a matter of right for individuals charged with an offense punishable by reclusion perpetua or life imprisonment when evidence of guilt is strong. A summary hearing by the trial court is required to determine the strength of the prosecution's evidence.
3. **Doctrine of Hierarchy of Courts:** Direct recourse to the Supreme Court in cases that can be appropriately handled by lower courts is generally discouraged to prevent overcrowding of the Supreme Court's docket and to adhere to procedural guidelines.

Historical Background: The case sought to address the pressing concern of prison congestion amid a global pandemic, highlighting the tension between public health and the imperative of criminal justice. The petitioners leveraged international standards and humanitarian grounds to argue for their provisional release, shedding light on the broader issue of jail conditions and the rights of detainees during extraordinary circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic.