

****Title:****

Ma. Liza M. Jorda v. Judge Crisologo S. Bitas, et al.

****Facts:****

- Complaints stemmed from Criminal Case Nos. 2009-11-537, 2009-11-538, and 2009-11-539 for Qualified Trafficking and Violation of RA No. 7610 filed against Danilo Miralles before the RTC Branch 7, Tacloban City.
- On January 15, 2010, Miralles filed a Motion for Judicial Determination of Probable Cause and Motion to Hold in Abeyance the Issuance of a Warrant of Arrest. Respondent Judge Bitas directed the prosecution to comment on the motion.
- The prosecution opposed and moved for arrest warrants, but no warrants were issued against Miralles.
- On February 2, 2011, Judge Bitas ruled that there was probable cause, but allowed bail at P40,000.00 per case without a hearing or motion to fix bail.
- On February 4, 2011, Miralles posted a cash bail bond totaling P120,000.00, which was promptly approved by Judge Bitas.
- Complainants alleged that Judge Bitas showed bias, failed to issue warrants despite probable cause, granted reduced bail without hearings, and mishandled court proceedings.
- Associate City Prosecutor Jorda alleged Judge Bitas's inappropriate questioning of witnesses, public humiliation, and favoring the accused. She further claimed Judge Bitas's improper behavior influenced her to transfer courts.

****Procedural Posture:****

- Complaints for Grave Abuse of Authority, Irregularity in Performance of Official Duties, Bias, and Partiality were filed by Leo C. Tabao and Ma. Liza M. Jorda.
- Separate, yet related, cases were consolidated by the Supreme Court.
- An investigation was conducted, and a finding of guilt was made by Associate Justice Carmelita Salandanan-Manahan with recommendations of fines.
- The Supreme Court reviewed the findings and issued its ruling.

****Issues:****

1. Whether Judge Bitas committed grave abuse of authority and gross ignorance of the law by failing to issue warrants of arrest and granting bail without proper proceedings.
2. Whether Judge Bitas demonstrated bias and partiality towards the accused Danilo Miralles.
3. Whether Judge Bitas's conduct during hearings and in his interactions with the complainants was appropriate and within the bounds of judicial conduct.

Court's Decision:

1. **Abuse of Authority and Ignorance of Law:**

- The Court held Judge Bitas failed to follow procedural rules by not issuing warrants despite probable cause and granting bail without hearing.
- His actions deprived the prosecution of due process.
- The ruling emphasized that in cases with capital offenses, hearings for bail are mandatory to determine the strength of evidence.

2. **Bias and Partiality:**

- Judge Bitas's conduct during court interactions, including inappropriate remarks to a prosecutor and improper questioning of witnesses, indicated bias.
- His connections with the Miralles family added to the perception of partiality.
- The Court found such behavior warrants disciplinary action as it lowers public trust in the judiciary.

3. **Judicial Conduct:**

- Judge Bitas's rude and demeaning behavior towards complainants and inappropriate courtroom conduct were unfitting for a judicial officer.
- Such attitude demonstrated a lack of impartiality and propriety expected from a judge.

Doctrine:

- Judges must observe proper procedure in bail hearings for offenses punishable by reclusion perpetua or life imprisonment, ensuring the prosecution can present evidence of guilt.
- Judicial conduct must maintain integrity, propriety, impartiality, and respect to sustain public confidence in the judiciary.
- Remarks and actions that display partiality or misuse of judicial power warrant disciplinary measures.

Class Notes:

- **Bail Guidelines:** In serious crimes, bail can only be granted after a proper hearing determining the strength of evidence against the accused (Sec. 7, Rule 114 of the Revised Rules of Criminal Procedure).
- **Judicial Conduct:** Judges should avoid not only impropriety but also its appearance, and treat all parties respectfully (Sec. 1, Canon 4 of the New Code of Judicial Conduct).
- **Intemperate Language:** Use of inappropriate language by judges is prohibited and they must exhibit courtesy and professionalism (Canon 4, New Code of Judicial Conduct).

****Historical Background:****

- The case revolves around judicial propriety and adherence to procedural law, highlighting the judiciary's role in upholding legal standards and maintaining public trust during sensitive criminal proceedings. This underscores ongoing efforts in the Philippine judiciary to enforce accountability and exemplify the highest ethical standards among its members.