

****Title:****

Helen M. Alberto vs. Spouses Nicasio Flores, Jr. and Perlita Flores

****Facts:****

On August 25, 2009, Helen M. Alberto and her siblings (collectively, “the Malits”) filed a complaint for the cancellation and nullity of Free Patent No. 035408-09-1197 and Katibayan ng Orihinal na Titulo Blg. 14447, covering Lot No. 1298 of the Lubao Cadastre. They alleged the respondents procured these titles fraudulently. The Malits claimed ownership via inheritance from their mother, whose ownership over Lots 665, 666, 667, and 1298 was confirmed by a 1959 court decision. They argued that the lot was private property and not public land eligible for a free patent.

Respondents, on the other hand, filed for a free patent in May 2008, which led to the issuance of the said titles by the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) and the Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office (PENRO). Respondents claimed uninterrupted possession and cultivation of the land.

The Regional Trial Court (RTC) ruled in favor of the Malits, declaring the free patent and corresponding title null and void due to fraud. However, the Court of Appeals (CA) reversed the RTC, stating the Malits failed to prove fraud and suggesting their inaction over time implied abandonment of their claim.

****Issues:****

1. Did the CA err in its finding that the Malits failed to prove fraud in the respondents’ application for a free patent?
2. Did the CA err in applying the doctrine of laches against the Malits’ claim?

****Court’s Decision:****

1. ****Proving Fraud:**** The Supreme Court found that the CA erred in concluding that the Malits failed to prove fraud. The court highlighted the October 28, 1959 Decision, which adjudicated Lot No. 1298 as private land. Thus, CENRO and PENRO had no jurisdiction to issue the free patent. Since the land was already classified as private, any patent or title issued thereafter was void ab initio.

2. ****Doctrine of Laches:**** The application of the doctrine of laches against the Malits was found improper by the Supreme Court. It explained that land registration proceedings are in rem and bind the whole world. Once adjudicated, as in the 1959 decision, the title becomes final without further action necessary to enforce ownership, thus nullifying the applicability

of laches or statute of limitations.

****Doctrine:****

- Cadastral proceedings, once final, issue a judicial decree that vests title in the adjudicatees. Such land becomes private property and cannot be acquired by adverse possession.
- Free patents can only be issued for disposable lands of the public domain and not for private lands.
- The statute of limitations and the doctrine of laches do not apply to decisions in land registration cases under the Property Registration Decree (P.D. No. 1529).

****Class Notes:****

1. ****Ownership Confirmation:**** A final judgment confirming land title and ordering its registration constitutes res judicata.
2. ****Public vs. Private Land:**** Free patents cannot be issued over lands already classified as private; any patent issued over such land is null and void.
3. ****Laches and Land Registration:**** Laches and statute of limitations do not apply to decisions in land registration cases as ownership is established by judicial declaration.
4. ****Torrens System:**** Title under the Torrens System confirms existing ownership but does not create it.

****Historical Background:****

This case lies within the context of land titling and registration in the Philippines, where the conversion of public lands to private ownership commonly arises through judicial adjudication in cadastral proceedings. Issues of fraud in land registration continue to challenge the integrity of land ownership and resource allocation. The case underscores the significance of judicial proceedings in land ownership confirmation and the legal boundaries within which land titles may be nullified.