

Title: People of the Philippines v. Sebastian S. Lambino, 103 Phil. 504 (1956)

Facts:

1. **Initial Charge and Arrest**: On August 25, 1952, the appellant, Sebastian S. Lambino, was charged with malversation of public funds amounting to P16,267.65. This amount was later amended to P16,287.65. Lambino was subsequently arrested.
2. **Arraignment and Preliminary Investigation**: The arraignment was initially set for February 12, 1953, but was postponed multiple times at Lambino's request. Finally, on March 12, 1953, he was arraigned, entering a plea of not guilty.
3. **Trial Dates and Motion for Preliminary Investigation**: The case was set for hearing on May 11 and 12, 1954. It was postponed several times to May 26, June 17, June 29, and July 13, 1954, at Lambino's petition. On July 13, Lambino filed for a preliminary investigation, alleging the information was vague, but no initial action was taken on this motion.
4. **Renewal of Motion and Denial**: When the case was called on July 29, 1954, Lambino renewed his motion for a preliminary investigation, which was denied after the court reviewed the record and found the prior investigation satisfactory.
5. **Change of Plea to Guilty**: After the testimony of the first prosecution witness, Lambino, with counsel, requested to withdraw his not guilty plea, plead guilty, be granted the indeterminate sentence benefit, and defer sentencing. The trial court granted these requests.
6. **Judgment and Subsequent Motion**: On July 31, 1954, Lambino was found guilty and sentenced to a penalty of 8-12 years, fined, ordered to indemnify the municipal government, suffer perpetual disqualification from public office, and pay costs. On August 14, 1954, he filed a petition to withdraw the guilty plea, claiming he was influenced improperly and misunderstood the plea's consequences.
7. **Final Appeals and Certification**: The lower court overruled his petition and subsequent motion for reconsideration/new trial; Lambino appealed. The case was elevated to the Court of Appeals and then certified to the Supreme Court, where only legal questions were raised.

Issues:

1. **Whether the lower court erred in not granting a preliminary investigation.**

2. **Whether the lower court erred in denying Lambino's motion to withdraw his guilty plea.**
3. **Whether the lower court erred in denying the motion for reconsideration and new trial based on newly discovered evidence.**

Court's Decision:

1. **Preliminary Investigation:** The Court held no irregularity on the trial court's part for not granting the preliminary investigation motion, as it was filed post-arraignment, constituting a waiver of the right. The appellant's failure to challenge the denial of his renewed motion before trial commenced also barred him from claiming error.
2. **Withdrawal of Guilty Plea:** The Court found no abuse of discretion by the trial court in denying the plea withdrawal. It highlighted that the plea was voluntary, informed, and made after consulting with counsel, affecting the weight of external influence claims.
3. **Reconsideration and New Trial:** The Court deemed the motion baseless, as a plea of guilty equates to an admission of charges, preventing contradiction by evidence or further disputes. The allegedly new evidence would not have altered the judgment.
4. **Modification of Penalty:** The Supreme Court identified errors in the penalties imposed, clarifying that the correct sentence range under the Revised Penal Code was not initially applied; thus, adjusted the sentence to 10 years and 1 day of "prison mayor" to 16 years, 5 months, and 11 days of "reclusion temporal".

Doctrine:

- **Waiver of Preliminary Investigation:** The right to preliminary investigation can be waived if not timely claimed before a plea.
- **Plea Withdrawal:** Withdrawal of a guilty plea is discretionary, not a right, particularly when informed and voluntary.
- **Impact of Guilty Plea:** Such a plea is equivalent to an admission of facts alleged, barring contrary evidence or newly discovered exonerating evidence.

Class Notes:

- **Malversation of Public Funds (RPC Art. 217):** Key elements: (a) is a public officer, (b) has custody due to official duties, (c) accountable for public funds, (d) misappropriation occurs.
- **Indeterminate Sentence Law:** Determines sentencing range, especially applicable when changing guilty pleas and reviewing imposed penalties.

- **Legal Strategy Tip**: Timing in asserting rights or making motions is crucial in criminal procedure—it impacts the substantive rights and potential outcomes.

Historical Background:

- The decision comes in the post-World War II era where integrity and accountability in public service were being closely scrutinized in the Philippines, reflecting a judiciary aiming to uphold transparency and discipline in public office, essential for rebuilding trust in governmental institutions after a period of turbulent history.