

Title

Heirs of Margarito Pabaus vs. Heirs of Amanda Yutiamco, 670 Phil. 151

Facts

The dispute concerns overlapping claims on three adjoining parcels of land in Barangay Cabayawa, Tubay, Agusan del Norte. These parcels are:

1. Lot 1, Plan Psu-213148, 58,292 sqm, covered by OCT No. O-104.
2. Lot 2, Plan Psu-213148, 1,641 sqm, initially covered by OCT No. O-104 and subsequently covered by TCT No. T-1428.
3. Lot 2994, Pls-736, 35,077 sqm, covered by OCT No. P-8649 issued to Margarito Pabaus via Free Patent No. (X-2)102.

The respondents (Heirs of Amanda Yutiamco) alleged that the petitioners (Heirs of Margarito Pabaus) encroached upon their lands, harvested coconuts, and built a house on the disputed land despite repeated objections and demands to vacate. They claimed that OCT No. P-8649 is invalid as it partly overlaps with the land covered by Decree No. N-130700 and OCT No. O-104 issued to Amanda Yutiamco.

Petitioners countered with the contention that their activities were rightful since they held OCT No. P-8649. They also argued that it was respondents who were encroaching on their lands and presented a sketch plan by Engr. Rosalinda V. De Casa as evidence.

A relocation survey was agreed upon by both parties and conducted under the supervision of the RTC-appointed commissioner. The results showed substantial overlapping, favoring the respondents. The RTC eventually ruled in favor of the respondents, declaring OCT No. P-8649 null and void.

The petitioners appealed to the Court of Appeals (CA), which affirmed the RTC's ruling. Dissatisfied, the petitioners brought the case to the Supreme Court.

Issues

1. Whether the CA erred in affirming the RTC decision that the petitioners' claims overlapped with the respondents' lands.
2. Whether the CA erred in relying on the findings of the court-appointed private surveyor over the official findings during the cadastral survey conducted by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

Court's Decision

1. **Overlapping of Claims:** The Supreme Court found that the evidence presented by the respondents did not definitively prove the claim of overlapping. The cadastral survey and relocation surveys used different methodologies, and the essential documents required by the Manual for Land Surveys in the Philippines (MLSP) were not fully complied with by Engr. Estaca in his report. Therefore, the argument about the accuracy of the overlapping remained unresolved, necessitating a more conclusive verification/relocation survey by the Land Management Bureau (LMB-DENR).

2. **Validity of Relying on the Survey Findings:** The Supreme Court held that the trial court's reliance on a private surveyor was inappropriate and emphasized the need for a survey conducted under the supervision of the LMB-DENR to ensure impartiality and adherence to standards.

Due to these deficiencies, the Supreme Court concluded that the CA and RTC erred in their judgment. The decision to declare OCT No. P-8649 null and void was deemed premature without definitive proof of overlap.

Doctrine

1. **Priority of Earlier Titles:** Recognizes that earlier titles (e.g., OCT No. O-104) generally hold precedence over later-issued titles if overlaps occur.

2. **Invalidity of Free Patents Over Private Lands:** A Free Patent issued for already privately owned lands is considered null and void.

3. **Due Process in Land Surveys:** Accurate relocation surveys must adhere to MLSP standards and be conducted or verified by authoritative government agencies (LMB-DENR) to settle disputes about overlapping claims.

Class Notes

- **Overlapping Titles:** Disputes typically require official surveys by government agencies to definitively resolve boundary issues.

- **Jurisdictional Authority:** The Director of Lands cannot grant Free Patents over private lands (Public Land Act applicability).

- **Relocation Surveys:** Must be conducted using approved methods and corroborated by relevant government agencies for legitimacy.

- **Doctrine of Prior Title:** Earlier judicially decreed titles take precedence over later administrative ones issued by patents.

- **Standard of Evidence:** Court-appointed commissioners must adhere to technical

standards and get verification from authorized agencies.

Historical Background

This case highlights issues arising from land titling practices and the effectiveness of cadastral surveys in the Philippines. Land disputes involving overlapping titles often occur due to inaccuracies in historical records, surveys, and insufficient verification processes. The necessity of government oversight in land surveys emphasizes the state's role in upholding the Torrens system of land registration and ensuring legal clarity in property ownership. This case also underscores the difficulties in land ownership rights in rural areas and the importance of stringent verification standards to prevent fraudulent claims.