

Title:

Fernando U. Batul vs. Lucilo Bayron and COMELEC (First Division), G.R. Nos. 157687 & 158959

Facts:

1. **Election Results**: Fernando U. Batul and Lucilo R. Bayron contested the vice-mayor position in Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, in the elections held on 14 May 2001. Batul was declared the winner with 18,095 votes to Bayron's 15,810.
2. **Election Protest Filed**: On 29 May 2001, Bayron filed an election protest with the COMELEC challenging the results, alleging various anomalies and irregularities across 392 precincts.
3. **Answer with Counter-Protest**: Batul responded by denying Bayron's allegations and counter-alleged that Bayron committed electoral fraud.
4. **Procedural Developments**:
 - 14 Sep 2001: COMELEC First Division directed Bayron to pay the deposit for ballot revision and both parties to submit revisors.
 - 12 Nov 2001: Four Revision Committees were constituted to conduct a ballot revision.
 - 12 Dec 2001: Ballot revision concluded.
 - 30 Apr 2002: Revision Committees submitted their reports, favoring Bayron with 17,248 votes over Batul's 16,581 votes.
 - 10 June 2002: COMELEC admitted Bayron's Offer of Evidence.
5. **Presentation of Evidence**:
 - 29 July 2002: Batul's request to present 50 BEI chairpersons to verify signatures on the ballots was denied.
 - 12 Feb 2003 and 21 Mar 2003: Orders were issued by the COMELEC denying Batul's motions.
6. **Certiorari Petitions**:
 - 11 Apr 2003: Batul filed G.R. No. 157687 against the 12 Feb and 21 Mar 2003 Orders.
 - 2 July 2003: COMELEC annulled Batul's proclamation and ordered Batul to vacate office.
 - 21 July 2003: COMELEC granted immediate execution of the judgment despite Batul's motion for reconsideration.
 - 25 July 2003: Batul filed G.R. No. 158959 against the immediate execution order.
7. **Consolidation**: The Supreme Court consolidated both petitions on 5 August 2003.

Issues:

1. Whether the COMELEC First Division acted with grave abuse of discretion by:
 - Denying Batul the opportunity to present the testimonies of 50 BEI chairpersons.

- Considering the case as submitted for resolution without giving Batul a fair chance to present evidence.

2. Whether the COMELEC First Division erred in executing its decision pending Batul's motion for reconsideration.

Court's Decision:

1. **Right to Present Evidence and Due Process**:

- The COMELEC's discretion was deemed proper as it found the presentation of 50 BEI chairpersons neither feasible nor necessary.

- The denial did not violate Batul's due process rights since he had opportunity through other means to present his case.

- COMELEC found no distinct variations in the BEI chairpersons' signatures on the ballots, negating the need for further testimony.

- Ballots were deemed the best evidence, overriding other testimonial evidence.

2. **Immediate Execution of Judgment**:

- The COMELEC justified immediate execution pending appeal based on the principle that it serves public policy to determine the true will of the electorate promptly.

- COMELEC First Division deemed valid reasons to grant immediate execution (e.g., shortness of the disputed term, length of the process).

- Section 2, Rule 39 of the Rules of Court was applied suppletorily, supporting the expedited resolution of electoral disputes.

Doctrine:

1. **Ballots as Best Evidence**:

- In election contests, ballots themselves are considered the most conclusive evidence over other forms of testimony regarding the correctness of votes.

2. **Expedited Judicial Procedures in Election Disputes**:

- Election laws and procedural rules are construed to facilitate the swift ascertainment of the electorate's true will, supporting the immediate execution of judgments when justified.

Class Notes:

1. **Key Elements/Concepts**:

- **Election Contest**: Legal proceeding challenging election results.

- **Ballots as Primary Evidence**: Emphasis on physical ballots for determining election outcomes.

- **Discretionary Execution Pending Appeal**: Immediate execution of decisions in election

cases based on compelling public interest.

2. **Relevant Statutes/Provisions**:

- **Sec. 181, Omnibus Election Code**: Specifies features of official ballots.
- **COMELEC Rules of Procedure, Rule 17, Sec 2**: Order of hearing in election protests.
- **Rule 39, Sec. 2, Rules of Court**: Discretionary execution pending appeal.

Historical Background:

The case highlights reforms in Philippine electoral procedures emphasizing the prompt resolution of election disputes. Historically, electoral protests often became protracted, delaying the assumption of office by duly elected candidates. The rulings in this case underscore the judiciary's commitment to a more efficient and expedient electoral process, aligning with public policy to swiftly resolve the legality of election outcomes and ensure public office is occupied by the legitimate choice of the people.