

RE: REPORT ON THE JUDICIAL AUDIT IN RTC-BRANCH 15, OZAMIZ CITY (JUDGE PEDRO L. SUAN; JUDGE RESURRECTION T. INTING OF BRANCH 16, TANGUB CITY)

A.M. No. RTJ-04-1849. September 20, 2004

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

The Court reiterates the common sense rule that once retired, judges may no longer decide cases. Neither may they, or even their successors, promulgate decisions written while they were still in office. In short, once retired, they can no longer write or promulgate decisions, orders or other actions proper only to incumbents.

The Case and the Facts

Before the Court are cases against Judge Pedro L. Suan (retired) of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 15, Ozamiz City, for gross inefficiency and ignorance of the law; and Judge Resurrection T. Inting (also now retired) of the Regional Trial Court of Tangub City, Branch 16, for ignorance of the law. These cases originated as Administrative Matter No. 02-5-298-RTC (Re: Report on the Judicial Audit in the Regional Trial Court, Branch 15, of Ozamiz City).

The Report of the Judicial Audit Team of the Office of the Court Administrator[1] (OCA) dated May 15, 2002, disclosed that the Regional Trial Court, Branch 15, Ozamiz City, had as of December 14, 2001, an inventory of two hundred twenty-three (223) civil and criminal cases, of which thirty-nine (39) had already been submitted for decision, but had yet to be acted upon.

Earlier, presiding Judge Pedro L. Suan, in his December 13, 2001 Letter, requested an extension of time within which to finish the foregoing backlog. In a Resolution dated February 11, 2002, this Court granted his request and gave him one hundred eighty (180) days from notice to decide the cases. During the extended period, only fifteen (15) cases were disposed of within the mandated reglementary period. Thus, he left a total of twenty-four (24) unresolved cases.

On account of this delay, the Court, in a Resolution dated August 12, 2002, directed Judge Suan to do the following:

“a) to DECIDE within thirty (30) days from notice Civil Cases Nos. 93-64 (Guani Milling vs. PPA); 99-12 (Rural Bank of Ozamiz City, Inc. vs. Casco) and 97-39 (Tee vs. Argelio, et. al.) and Criminal Case No. 2795 (People vs. Jamago); and to SUBMIT copies of his decisions, through the Office of the Court Administrator, within (10) days from rendition/promulgation thereof;

“b) to inform this Court, through the Office of the Court Administrator, within ten (10) days from notice hereof, whether or not the following cases were decided/resolved within the reglementary period to wit: Civil Cases Nos. 07-99 (Heirs of Roberta de Ruedas, et. al., vs. Lolita Carpio); OZC-98-65 (Constancio Suevo IV vs. Guadoso III); OZC00-24 (Leo Obut vs. Hilda E. Hamot); SP-01-0146 (In Re: Petition for Adoption, Fuentes,

petitioner), OZC-98-21 (Florida vs. Sps. Role), SP-022-01 (In Re: Petition for Adoption of Joshua Tecson), OZC 00-46 (Uy vs. Standard Insurance) 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. vs. United Church of Christ of the Philippines), 97-46 (Heirs of C. Villagoagalo vs. Anslag, et al.) and 21-01 (Go vs. PNB) and to SUBMIT copies of his decisions through the Office of the Court Administrator within ten (10) days from rendition/promulgation thereof;

“c) to IMMEDIATELY RESOLVE the pending motions in Criminal Case No. 2710 and Civil Case No. 91-19; and to SUBMIT a report thereon within twenty (20) days from notice;

“d) to TAKE APPROPRIATE ACTION on the three (3) cases which were not acted upon and/or without further setting after the lapse of considerable length of time namely; Civil Cases Nos. 97-40 and 2910 and Criminal Case No. 2811, and on the following ten (10) criminal cases which may be acted upon in accordance with Administrative Circular No. 7-A-92 dated 21 June 1993, re: Guidelines in the archiving of cases, namely: Criminal Cases Nos. 2925, 2998, 2999, 3001, 3004, 2991, 3005, 3006, 3007 and 3011, to SUBMIT a report thereon, within twenty (20) days from notice, and to FURNISH this Court copies of his decisions on the twenty-eight (28) cases subject of his request for extension of time to resolve cases in A.M. No. 02-1-41-RTC, within ten (10) days from rendition/promulgation thereof.”[2]

Subsequent to his retirement, respondent judge promulgated Decisions in three of the cases referred to in the foregoing directive; namely, Civil Case Nos. 93-64 (Guani Milling v. PPA), 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. v. United Church of Christ of the Philippines) and 95-01 (Heirs of Ramon Manuel Bernad v. Municipality of Clarin, Misamis Occidental) on July 19, 2002, August 18, 2002, and July 3, 2002, respectively. All these dates were well beyond Judge Suan’s compulsory retirement on May 29, 2002.[3]

Further, Decisions in Criminal Case Nos. RTC 1225 (People v. Alberto Dionson), RTC-1878 (People v. Dandy Rubi), RTC-1974 (People v. Amir Razo Vidal), RTC-2003 (People v. Joseph Elnas), RTC 2464 (People v. Larry Gascore), RTC 2646 (People v. Felipe Carreon IV), and RTC-2051 (People v. Vevencio Paglinawan) -- though penned and signed by Judge Suan during his incumbency -- were promulgated after his retirement by Judge Resurrection T. Inting, who was designated acting presiding judge.[4]

The foregoing circumstances put into question the validity of the foregoing Decisions. Well-established is the rule on the invalidity of decisions issued and promulgated after the judge who has signed them ceases to hold office.[5]

Upon the recommendation[6] of Deputy Court Administrator Christopher O. Lock, the Court issued its August 13, 2003 Resolution, which we quote:

“a

Judge Pedro Suan, retired Judge, Regional Trial Court, Ozamiz City, Branch 15, to EXPLAIN why he should not be administratively dealt with for deciding Civil Case No. 93-64 (Guani Milling vs. PPA), Civil Case No. 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. vs. United Church of Christ of the Philippines) and Civil Case No. 95-1 (Heirs of Ramon Manuel Bernad, etc. vs. The Municipality of Clarin, Misamis Occidental, etc.) even beyond his term; and

“b)

Judge Resurrection T. Inting, retired Judge, Regional Trial Court, Tangub City, Branch 16 to EXPLAIN why he should not be administratively dealt with for promulgating the decisions in Criminal Cases Nos. RTC-1225 (People vs. Alberto Dionson), RTC-1878 (People vs. Dandy Rubio), RTC-1974 (People vs. Amir Razo Vidal), RTC-2003 (People vs. Joseph Elnas), RTC-2464 (People vs. Larry Gascore), RTC-2646 (People vs. Felipe

Carreon IV), and RTC-2051 (People vs. Vevencio Paglinawan) penned by Judge Pedro Suan during his incumbency, but who was no longer in the service when the promulgation was done.”[7]

In compliance with the foregoing Resolution, Judge Suan filed his letter dated September 15, 2003, in which he tried to explain his side as follows:

“As there were many cases submitted for decision x x x and sensing that I could not finish writing the decisions on the day of my retirement on 29 May 2002, I asked for an extension of time to decide these cases after the reglementary ninety (90) day period. While awaiting for the response of my request I managed to write the decision in Civil Case No. 95-01 (Heirs of Ramon Manuel Bernad, et. al., vs. Municipality of Clarin, Misamis Occidental, et. al.) I finished writing the decision on July 3, 2002. I also prepared and [wrote] the joint decision in the twin Civil Case No. 95-26 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. vs. Roseller Evasco) and Civil Case No. 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. vs. United Church of Christ in the Philippines) and the decision in Civil Case No. 93-64 (Guani Milling Corporation vs. PPA and Vicente Lao). The joint decision in Civil Case Nos. 95-26 and 98-42 was finished on August 18, 2002 and the decision in Civil Case No. 93-64 on August 19, 2002.

“In September 2002, I received the resolution dated August 12, 2002 in Administrative Matter No. 02-5-298-RTC (Report on the Judicial Audit in the Regional Trial Court, Ozamiz City, Branch 15) directing the undersigned to furnish the Court of his decisions on the twenty-eight (28) cases subject of his request for extension of time to resolve said cases in Administrative Matter No. 02-1-41-RTC within ten (10) days from rendition of the decision; and further directed the undersigned to decide within thirty (30) days from notice Civil Case No. 93-64 (Guani Milling Corporation vs. PPA) and to submit to the Court copies of his decisions within ten (10) days from rendition of the decision; and further directed the undersigned to inform the court whether or not Civil Case No. 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. vs. United Church of Christ in the Philippines) has been decided within the reglementary period. This particular directive has become moot and academic as this case is among the twenty-eight (28) cases subject of the request for extension of time. The directive contained in the resolution dated August 12, 2002 were religiously complied with by the undersigned.

“Such being the situation, it is my humble view that the decisions in Civil Case No. 93-64, Civil Case No. 98-42 and Civil Case No. 95-01 were validly rendered pursuant to the Court’s resolution of August 12, 2002.

“I must also state with candor and pride without necessarily indulging in self-gratification that the parties in these three civil cases never questioned the validity and legality of the decisions because they have faith in the sense of justice and honesty of the undersigned.

“If ever the undersigned is mistaken in his understanding and interpretation of the August 12, 2002 resolution, I beg for forgiveness because human, as we are, we are subject to commit errors.

“In the name of equity, compassion and humanitarian considerations, I pray for a favorable resolution on the issue.”[8]

For his part, Judge Inting submitted to the Court the following explanation:

“Before the promulgation, I read the decisions penned by Judge Pedro Suan. Being convinced that his findings and conclusions therein are supported by the evidence on record, I decided to concur and adopt his decisions as my own.

“Considering my limited time as then Acting Executive Judge and Acting Presiding Judge of RTC-Branch 15, I did not think of preparing another decision x x x which will nonetheless result in the same findings. To my understanding, the fact that I have concurred and considered or adopted them as my own would be sufficient.

“WHEREFORE, it is hoped and prayed that the above explanation will merit the kind consideration of this Honorable Court.”[9]

In its May 24, 2004 Resolution, the Court docketed the matter as an Administrative Complaint against retired Judge Suan for gross inefficiency and ignorance of the law and Judge Inting for ignorance of the law.

Evaluation and Recommendation of the Office of the Court Administrator

The Office of the Court Administrator found Judge Suan to have incurred delays in deciding cases and to have decided cases even after his retirement. It also found that these Decisions had inappropriately been promulgated by Judge Inting. Hence, it recommended that they both be held liable for gross inefficiency and ignorance of the law, in this wise:

“x x x. Judge Suan compulsorily retired last 29 May 2002. Judge Suan resolved on 19 July 2002, Civil Case No. 93-64, entitled ‘Guani Milling vs. PPA’, even before he received in September 2002 the Resolution dated 12 August 2002 of the Honorable Third Division directing him to decide within thirty (30) days from notice Civil Case No. 93-64. Besides, the fact that the parties did not question his decisions does not absolve him from liability. Just the same his decisions rendered after his retirement are null and void. Moreover, he incurred delay in deciding these cases. Thus, Civil Case No. 93-64 was due for decision on 19 March 2002; Civil Case No. 98-42 on 1 March 2002; and Civil Case No. 95-01 on 1 August 2001.

“In the same vein, Judge Inting is equally liable for promulgating the decisions in Criminal Cases Nos. RTC-1225 (People vs. Alberto Dionson), RTC-1878 (People vs. Dandy Rubio), RTC -1974 (People vs. Amir Razo Vidal), RTC-2003 (People vs. Joseph Elnas), RTC-2464 (People vs. Larry Gascore), RTC 2646 (People vs. Felipe Carreon IV) and RTC-2051 (People vs. Vevencio Paglinawan) which were penned by Judge Pedro Suan during his incumbency. It is not enough that he concurred on the said decisions and promulgated them without rewriting and signing the same as his own.

x x x x x x x x

“In view of the foregoing, it is respectfully recommended that: a) this matter be docketed as an administrative complaint against Judge Pedro Suan (Ret.), Regional [Trial Court], Branch 15, Ozamiz City, for gross inefficiency and ignorance of the law; and against Judge [Resurrection] Inting (Ret.), Regional Trial Court, Branch 16, Tangub City, for ignorance of the law; b) Judge Pedro Suan be FINED the amount of Ten Thousand (P10,000.00) Pesos to be deducted from the retirement benefits due him; c) Judge Inting be FINED the amount of Five Thousand (P5,000.00) Pesos to be deducted from the retirement benefits due him; and d) the Court of Appeals to be informed that Civil Cases Nos. 95-64, 98-42 and 95-01, appealed thereat were decided after the retirement of Judge Pedro Suan.”[10]

The Court’s Ruling

We agree with the OCA and adopt its findings, but modify the amount of the fine imposed to conform with the law on the matter.

Under Article VIII of Section 11 of the Constitution, judges shall hold office during good behavior until the age of seventy or until they become incapacitated to discharge the duties of their office. Because Judge Suan compulsorily retired on May 29, 2002, he could no longer continue -- after that date -- to exercise the powers of his office, including the authority to decide and promulgate cases. Thus, his Decisions in Civil Case Nos. 93-64, 98-42 and 95-01 -- promulgated on July 19, 2002, August 18, 2002 and July 3, 2002, respectively -- are null and void.

Entrenched in our jurisprudence as early as 1917 is the principle that for judgments to be valid and binding, they should be made by legally constituted judges.[11] Further, not only must judges make their judgments during their tenure, they must also promulgate these within that period.[12] As reiterated in *People v. Labao*,[13] “for a

judgment to be valid, it must be duly signed and promulgated during the incumbency of the judge who signed it; otherwise, it cannot acquire a binding effect.”

Thus, likewise devoid of any legality were the Decisions of Judge Suan in Criminal Case Nos. RTC-1225 (People v. Alberto Dionson), RTC-1878 (People v. Dandy Rubio), RTC-1974 (People v. Amir Razo Vidal), RTC-2003 (People v. Joseph Elnas), RTC-2464 (People v. Larry Gascore), RTC-2646 (People v. Felipe Carreon IV) and RTC-2051 (People v. Vevencio Paglinawan). Though promulgated by his successor, Respondent Judge Inting, these were penned and signed by Judge Suan during his incumbency.

In response, Judge Suan argues that none of the parties in Civil Case Nos. 93-64, 98-42 and 95-01 ever questioned the validity of the disputed Decisions, purportedly because of their faith in his sense of justice and honesty. Needless to say, a decision that is void for failure to comply with substantial requirements would remain invalid, notwithstanding the failure of the parties to question it. Be that as it may, Judge Suan’s claim is nonetheless belied by the plain fact that all three cases have been elevated to the Court of Appeals.[14]

To exculpate themselves, respondents cite the Supreme Court Resolution of August 12, 2002,[15] which both claim to have authorized them to dispose of the pending cases in the disputed manner. However, this Resolution cannot excuse either of them for ignorance of fundamental legal principles. On July 3 and July 19, 2002, well before the issuance of this Court’s August 12, 2002 Resolution, Judge Suan had already promulgated the Decisions in Civil Case Nos. 95-01 and 93-64. This means that, with or without the contentious August 12 directive, he would have proceeded to promulgate them.

The liability of both judges cannot be obliterated by their retirement. When a mistake has been committed as to constitute gross ignorance of the law, the respondent judge would necessarily be answerable despite compulsory retirement.[16]

As early as December 14, 2001, and prior to his receipt of the August 12 directive, Judge Suan had already incurred a delay in twenty-four (24) cases, according to the report of the judicial audit team. Such delays were in violation of the rule that judges should dispose of their business promptly and decide cases within the specified period. Under the Constitution, trial judges are given only ninety days -- from the filing of the last pleading, brief and memorandum -- within which to resolve the matter at hand.[17]

Members of the bench have always been exhorted to adhere strictly to the foregoing rule. Delay in case disposition is a major culprit in the erosion of public faith and confidence in the judiciary and the lowering of its standards.[18] Failure to comply with the reglementary period has always been regarded as gross inefficiency.[19] Canon 6 of the Code of Judicial Ethics unequivocally requires magistrates to “be prompt in disposing of all matters submitted to [them], remembering that justice delayed is often justice denied.”

True, Judge Suan is guilty of delay in deciding cases; and both he and Judge Inting, of gross ignorance of the law. Nevertheless, the Court agrees with the recommendation of the OCA that the absence of bad faith on the part of both judges mitigates their liability.

“While Judge Suan erred in deciding Civil Case No. 93-64 (Guani Milling vs. PPA), Civil Case No. 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc., vs. United Church of Christ of the Philippines) and Civil Case No. 95-01 (Heirs of Ramon Manuel Bernad, etc. vs. The Municipality of Clarin, Misamis Occidental, etc.) said infractions do not show that they were done in bad faith. It is not difficult to see that Judge Suan was misled by the resolution dated 12 August 2002. Prior to his retirement on 29 May 2002, Judge Suan asked for an extension to draft the decisions in the aforementioned cases. On 12 August 2002, this Court, acting on the report on the judicial audit conducted in Judge Suan’s court, issued a resolution directing him to decide the three (3) cases. When he received the resolution, he had already retired but because of the categorical directive

for him to decide the said cases, he rendered judgment therein by adopting his draft decisions.

“Judge Inting also erred in promulgating the decisions of Judge Suan. But like Judge Suan, it cannot be said that his actions were tainted with malice. He was merely of the wrong impression that he could validly promulgate said decisions as he found the same supported with evidence and the law. It has to be noted that Judge Inting was designated as the Acting Presiding Judge of the Regional Trial Court of Branch 15, Ozamiz City, after Judge Suan’s retirement, in addition to his regular duties in his own court in the Regional Trial Court, Branch 16, Tangub City. Judge Inting has also retired compulsorily last 25 May 2003, and was likewise audited. The Audit Team found his court to be efficiently managed and found no case submitted for decision, with all cases properly acted upon.

“The absence of bad faith or malice will not totally exculpate them for gross inefficiency, for delay in rendering decisions and ignorance of the law. This may however, mitigate their liability.”

In arriving at the proper fine to be imposed, the OCA ratiocinated thus:

“Under Section 9(1), Rule 140 of the Revised Rules of Court, as amended, undue delay in rendering decision is classified as a less serious charge. Under Section 11 (B) of the same Rule, the penalty for such charge is suspension from office without salary and other benefits for not less than one (1) nor more than three (3) months, or a fine of more than P10,000.00 but not exceeding P20,000.00. (Cases left undecided by Retired Judge Antonio E. Arbis, RTC, Branch 48, Bacolod City, A.M. No. 99-1-01-RTC, January 20, 2004). However, as earlier discussed, this office finds that there was no bad faith or malice attendant to the acts complained of and their liability may be tempered. A fine of P10,000.00 for Judge Suan and P5,000.00 for Judge Inting appears just under the circumstances of this case.[20]

The OCA, however, considered only the charge of “gross inefficiency” that had resulted in delay in rendering a decision. That charge does not apply to Judge Inting, whose liability is limited only to promulgating decisions penned by his predecessor.

Moreover, the OCA overlooked the charge of “gross ignorance of law and procedure.” Gross ignorance of the law, classified as a serious charge under the Rules of Court, is punishable with a fine of more than twenty thousand pesos (P20,000) but not exceeding forty thousand pesos (P40,000).[21] Considering the absence of malice and bad faith on the part of both judges, the Court deems it proper to impose on each of them a fine of P21,000 only.

WHEREFORE, retired Judge Pedro L. Suan is found GUILTY of gross inefficiency and is accordingly fined in the amount of eleven thousand pesos (P11,000). Furthermore, retired Judges Pedro L. Suan and Resurrection T. Inting are both found GUILTY of gross ignorance of the law and are each fined in the amount of twenty-one thousand pesos (P21,000).

SO ORDERED.

Sandoval-Gutierrez, Corona, and Carpio-Morales, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo; Report on the Judicial Audit in RTC, Branch 15, Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental, dated May 15, 2002.

[2] Rollo; Resolution of the Third Division dated August 12, 2002.

[3] July 17, 2003; Memorandum of the OCA for Justice Reynato S. Puno, chairman of the Third Division.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Nazareno v. Court of Appeals, 428 Phil. 32, February 27, 2002.

[6] In his Memorandum dated July 17, 2003, the Deputy Court Administrator made the following recommendation:

“Premises considered, it is respectfully recommended that: a) Judge Pedro Suan, Retired Judge, RTC, Branch 15, Ozamis City, be DIRECTED to explain why he should not be administratively dealt with for deciding Civil Case No. 93-64 (Guani Milling vs. PPA), Civil Case No. 98-42 (Tudela Evangelical Church, Inc. vs. United Church of Christ of the Philippines) and Civil Case No. 95-1 (Heirs of Ramon Manuel Bernad, etc. vs. the Municipality of Clarin, Misamis Occidental, etc.) even beyond his term and c) Judge Resurrection T. Inting, Retired Judge, RTC, Branch 16, Tangub City, be likewise DIRECTED to explain why he should not be administratively dealt with for promulgating the decisions in Criminal Cases Nos. RTC 1225 (People vs. Alberto Dionson), RTC-1878 (People vs. Dandy Rubio), RTC-1974 (People vs. Amir Razo Vidal), RTC-2003 (People vs. Joseph Elnas), RTC-2464 (People vs. Larry Gascore), RTC 2646 (People vs. Felipe Carreon IV), and RTC-2051 (People vs. Vevencio Paglinawan) penned by Judge Pedro Suan during his incumbency, but who was no longer in the service when the promulgation was done.”

[7] Rollo; Resolution of the Third Division dated August 13, 2002.

[8] Rollo; retired Judge Pedro L. Suan’s Letter of Explanation dated September 15, 2003, addressed to the members of the Third Division.

[9] Rollo; retired Judge Resurrection T. Inting’s explanation dated September 18, 2003.

[10] Memorandum for Chief Justice Hilario G. Davide Jr. in “Re: Administrative Matter No. 02-5-298-RTC, Report on the Judicial Audit in the Regional Trial Court, Ozamiz City, Branch 15”; dated April 26, 2004, and signed by Court Administrator Presbitero J. Velasco Jr.

[11] Lino Luna v. Rodriguez and De los Angeles, 37 Phil. 186, 190, 194, November 26, 1917.

[12] People v. CA, 99 Phil. 787, 790, August 28, 1956.

[13] 220 SCRA 100, 102, March 17, 1993, per Bellosillo, J.

[14] Per verification by the Regional Trial Court, Branch 15 of Ozamiz City, Civil Case Nos. 95-64, 98-42 and 95-01 were appealed to the Court of Appeals on November 11, 2002, December 04, 2002, and October 10, 2002, respectively.

[15] Supra.

[16] Macasasa v. Imbing, 371 Phil. 314, 323, August 16, 1999.

[17] Abarquez v. Rebosura, 349 Phil. 24, 35, January 28, 1998.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Report on the Judicial Audit in RTC, Branch 27, Lapulapu City, 352 Phil. 223, 230, April 22, 1998.

[20] Rollo; Memorandum for Chief Justice Hilario G. Davide Jr., chairman of the First Division, “Re: Administrative Matter No. 02-5-298-RTC, Report on the Judicial Audit in the Regional Trial Court, Ozamiz City, Branch 15”; dated April 26, 2004.

[21] §11(3) of Rule 140 of the Rules of Court provides:

“Sanctions. –A. If the respondent is guilty of a serious charge, any of the following sanctions may be imposed:

x x x x x x x x

(3) A fine of more than P20,000.00 but not exceeding P40,000.00.

B. If the respondent is guilty of a less serious charge, any of the following sanctions shall be imposed:

x x x x x x x x

(2) A fine of more than P10,000.00 but not exceeding P20,000.00.

x x x x x x x x.”

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