

**RAFAEL MACAILING, SILVESTRE MACAILING, DOMINICO NECESITO
AND RAFAEL NECESITO, PLAINTIFFS-APPELLEES, VS. TOMAS
ANDRADA, MARIA ANDRADA, FEDERICO ANDRADA, FLORENCIA
VDA, DE ANDRADA...**

G.R. No. L-21607. January 30, 1970

Ponente: SANCHEZ, J.

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SANCHEZ, J.:

In this appeal from a judgment of the Court of First Instance of Cotabato ruling that defendant heirs of Salvador Andrada have lost their right to appeal from a decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources¹ and that, accordingly, defendant Executive Secretary, in behalf of the President, may no longer review such decision, we have for factual backdrop the following:

A dispute over four (4) parcels of land in Lebak, Cotabato, arose between plaintiffs, settlers thereon occupying four hectares each, and Salvador Andrada (later substituted by his heirs), sales applicant of a bigger parcel, which includes the lands occupied by plaintiffs. The District Land Officer of Cotabato decided in plaintiffs' favor, excluded the four parcels of land claimed by plaintiffs. The Director of Lands, however, reversed, declared that the portions adjudged to the four plaintiffs "shall be restored to the heirs (of Salvador Andrada) who should include them proportionately in the new applications to be filed by them respectively."

Appeal having been taken to the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the latter, on October 27, 1956, in turn reversed the Director of Lands by awarding to plaintiffs the lands they claimed. Defendants sought reconsideration. On May 30, 1957, the Secretary denied. Defendants moved once more to reconsider. On September 12, 1957, the Secretary rejected the reconsideration, ruled that his judgment in the case "had long become final and executory", and said: "Upon a review of the records, we found that the decision sought to be reconsidered in the present motion had long become final and executory."

Consequently, this Office has no more jurisdiction to entertain the said motion." The Secretary categorically stated that the case was "considered a closed matter insofar as this Office is concerned." Defendants received copy of this denial on October 14, 1957.

On October 23, 1957, defendants appealed to the Office of the President.

On August 20, 1959, in a letter-decision, Assistant Executive Secretary Enrique C. Quema, "[b]y authority of the President", reversed the decision of the Secretary and declared that the lands involved "should be restored to the heirs of Andrada to be included in their individual applications."

Plaintiffs, on December 23, 1959, started the present suit in the Cotabato court. They raised the issue of finality of the decision of the Secretary.

On January. 21, 1963, upon a stipulation of facts entered into by the parties, the court rendered judgment, viz:

"WHEREFORE, the Court hereby declares the decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, dated October 27, 1956, marked as Exhibit 'G' of the STIPULATION OF FACTS valid, final and executory, and is hereby given due course and effect. A copy of said Exhibit 'C' of the STIPULATION OF FACTS is hereby attached and -appended as part and parcel of this decision, as Annex 'A' thereof.

The decision signed by Assistant Executive Secretary Enrique C. Quema authority of the President dated August 20, 1959, marked as Exhibit 'L' the Stipulation of Facts is hereby declared null and void and without any effect.

The Court refrains from making any special pronouncement as to costs."

Defendants appealed direct to this Court.

1. Defendants take the view that plaintiffs' remedy is certiorari, an ordinary civil action before the Court of First Instance. They aver that since plaintiffs did not avail of the proper remedy, action should be dismissed.

In matters of judicial review of administrative decisions, some statutes especially provide for such judicial review; others are silent. Mere silence, however, does not necessarily imply that judicial review is unavailable. Modes of judicial review vary according to the statutes: appeal, petition for review or a writ of certiorari. No general rule applies to all the various administrative agencies. Where the law stands mute, the accepted view is that the extraordinary remedies in the Rules of Court are still available.[2]

Deducible from the foregoing is that where administrative agencies have original jurisdiction in the premises, the court's interference with administrative action is necessarily limited. A review thereof cannot be done through an ordinary civil action if constitutional or legislative authority therefor is wanting. The remedies that can be availed of where the statute is silent, as in the present case, are the special civil actions for certiorari, prohibition and/or mandamus specified in the Rules of Court. In this case, therefore, we have no alternative but to hold that the plaintiffs' appropriate remedy is certiorari, not an ordinary civil action.

Certiorari appears to be the real course of action here taken by plaintiffs. While the petition by itself does not conform to the formal requirements, the allegations thereof show that plaintiffs charge defendant Assistant Executive Secretary with grave abuse of discretion in upholding defendants' appeal "in desecration of a solemn decision" of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources "that had already become 'final and executory.'" No necessity there was for plaintiffs to aver that there was no plain, speedy or adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law. This can be clearly read from the factual narration in the complaint. After all, the case has already reached the administrative peak - the Office of the President has already acted thereon. The fact that the petition was not verified may be excused. The case presented was one which shaped out a question of law. There were no facts that really needed confirmation under oath. In fact, no trial was conducted by the court below. Absence of verification here is not fatally defective.[3]

Thus it is, that plaintiffs' case, as we see it, is the special civil action of certiorari.

2. The next question is whether or not the Court of First Instance of Cotabato has jurisdiction to issue a writ of certiorari in this case, considering that defendant Assistant Executive Secretary holds office in Manila outside the territorial boundaries of said court.

The pertinent statutory provision, Section 44(h) of the Judiciary Act of 1948, reads: "Courts of First Instance shall have original jurisdiction: . . . (h) Said court and their judges, or any of them, shall have the power to issue writ of injunction, mandamus, certiorari, prohibition, quo warranto and habeas corpus in their respective provinces and districts, in the manner provided in the Rules of Court." Complementary thereto is Section 4, Rule 65, Rules of Court,[4] providing that: "The petition may be filed . . . if it relates to the acts or omissions of an inferior court, or

of a corporation, board, officer or person, in a Court of First Instance having jurisdiction thereof."

As early as *Castano vs. Lobingier*, 7 Phil. 91, 93-94, under previous legislations similar to Section 44(h) aforequoted, this Court has held that the writs of injunction and certiorari cannot be issued by the Court of First Instance of Leyte against the Justice of the Peace of Manila, who is outside the territorial boundaries of the issuing court. In *Acosta vs. Alvendia*, L-14598, October 31, 1960, the Court of First Instance of Manila issued a writ of preliminary injunction against the provincial sheriff of Nueva Ecija restraining the latter from executing the judgment rendered in a tenancy case by the Court of Agrarian Relations in Nueva Ecija. Upon Section 44(h) and Section 2, Rule 58,[5] this Court nullified the injunctive writ because "the jurisdiction or authority of courts of first instance to control or restrain acts by means of the writ of injunction is limited to acts which are being committed or about to be committed within the territorial boundaries of their respective provinces and districts."

Illuminating is *Samar Mining Co., Inc. vs. Arnado*, L-17109, June 30, 1961, 2 SCRA 782, 786. In that case, a petition for certiorari and prohibition with preliminary injunction was filed in the Court of First Instance of Manila against the Regional Administrator and Labor Attorney of the Department of Labor assigned to Cebu City, to review the latter's acts in a workmen's compensation case. The case was dismissed below upon the ground of wrong venue. This Court affirmed. Speaking through then Associate, now Chief, Justice Roberto Concepcion, we pronounced that the ordinary rules of venue in Rule 4 do not apply; that Section 4, Rule 65, heretofore transcribed, contemplates of venue, not jurisdiction, although it makes the former co-terminous with or dependent upon, the latter; that the jurisdiction therein alluded to is that over "the corporation, board, officer, or person" whose acts are in question, not jurisdiction over the subject-matter of the case; and that the rule-making power of this Court is limited to matters of pleading, practice and procedure and the admission to the practice of law, whereas the power to define, prescribe and apportion the jurisdiction of the various courts is within the exclusive province of Congress (Section 2, Article VIII, Constitution). We there concluded that the issuance of the writs prayed for over persons outside the territorial boundaries of the courts of first instance is denied said courts by the Judiciary Act of 1948.

In *Hacbang vs. The Ley te Autobus Co., Inc.*, L-17907, May 30, 1963, 8 SCRA 103, injunctive relief was sought in the Court of First Instance of Cebu to restrain the sheriff of Leyte from proceeding with the sale of a passenger bus upon a writ of execution of a judgment rendered by the Leyte court. It was held that the Cebu court acted in excess of its jurisdiction.

In *Alhambra Cigar and Cigarette Mfg. Co., Inc., vs. National Administrator of Regional Office No. 2*, L-20491, August 31, 1965, 14 SCRA 1019, a petition for certiorari and prohibition was lodged in the Court of First Instance of Manila against the Hearing Officer and Regional Administrator of the Department of Labor in Tuguegarao, Cagayan, in connection with a workmen's compensation case. We held that the Manila court was without power to issue the writs of certiorari and prohibition, relying upon the authority of *Samar Mining*, and was bereft of authority to issue a writ of injunction, citing *Acosta*.

In *People vs. Mencias*, L-19633, November 28, 1966, 18 SCRA 07, the Court of First Instance of Rizal enjoined the Manila fiscals, amongst others, from proceeding with the preliminary investigation of a criminal complaint. This Court declared the Rizal court to be devoid of authority to so enjoin in line with *Uhambra*. Then in 1967, the case of *Santos vs. Moreno*, L-15829, December 4, 1967, 21 SCRA 1141, 1152, affirmed *Castano vs. Lobingier*, supra. This was followed by *Cudiamat vs. Torres*, L-24225, February 22, 1968, 22 SCRA 695, 698. There, Preliminary injunction emanated from the Court of First Instance of Rizal restraining the implementation of an award on a public bidding for the supply of a police call and signal box system for Manila. Enjoined were the members of the committee on awards of Manila and the winner of the bid. This Court, thru Mr. Justice J.B.L. Reyes, ruled that: "The preliminary injunction that may be granted by a court of first instance under said Section 2

[Rule 58] is, in its application, co-extensive with the territorial boundaries of the province or district in which the said court sits." This doctrine was reiterated in *NAWASA vs. Reyes*, L-28597, February 29, 1968, 22 SCRA 905, where the Court of First Instance of Rizal enjoined NAWASA with its offices in Manila from proceeding with a particular bidding to be conducted in that city.

3. Worth remembering, of course, is that in the foregoing jurisprudence, injunctive or prohibitory writs are involved. Where the sole issue in court, however, is the legality of the decision of administrative officials, a different rule obtains.

Instructive on this point is *Gayacao vs. Executive Secretary*, L-21066, April 30, 1965, 13 SCRA 753, 756-757. There, plaintiff Gayacao instituted proceedings for certiorari and mandamus in the Court of First Instance of Basilan City against the Executive Secretary, the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the Director of Lands, and a private respondent. Gayacao sought nullification of the decision of the Director of Lands, and the affirmatory decisions of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Executive Secretary, for being contrary to law. Respondent officials moved to dismiss. They averred that the Basilan court had no jurisdiction to issue writs of certiorari or mandamus against them because the administrative orders and decisions complained of were promulgated by officers holding office outside the court's territorial jurisdiction. They invoked Section 44(h) of the Judiciary Act of 1948 and *Castano vs. Lobingier*, supra, *Acosta vs. Alvendia*, supra, and *Samar Mining Co., Inc. vs. Arnado*, supra. The lower court dismissed the case. Gayacao appealed. We reversed. This Court, speaking thru Mr-Justice J.B.L. Reyes, pronounced that: "The doctrines invoked in support of the theory of non-jurisdiction (*Castano vs. Lobingier*, 7 Phil. 91; *Acosta vs. Alvendia*, L-14598, Oct. 31, 1960; *Samar Mining vs. Arnado*, L-17109, June 30 1961) are inapplicable, in that those cases involved petitions for writs of injunction seeking to control the actions of courts or officers outside the territorial jurisdiction of the respondent courts involved. Here the sole point in issue is whether the decision of the respondent public officers was legally correct or not, and, without going into the merits of the case, we see no cogent reason why this power of judicial review should be confined to the courts of first instance of the locality where the offices of respondents are maintained, to the exclusion of the courts of first instance in those localities where the plaintiffs reside, and where the questioned decisions are being enforced." We there emphasized that: "It is easy to see that if the contested ruling of the court below is sustained the same would result not only in hardship to litigants of limited means, practically amounting to denial of access to the courts, but would also unnecessarily encumber the Manila courts whose dockets are already overburdened. Actually, since *Ortua vs. Singson*, 59 Phil. 440, the power of provincial courts of first instance to review administrative decisions of national officials, has been consistently recognized."

Palanan Lumber & Plywood Co., Inc. vs. Arranz, L-27106, March 20, 1968, 22 SCRA 1186, then drew the line between the precept enunciated in *Gayacao* and previous case law. This Court, again speaking thru Mr. Justice J.B.L. Reyes, there said that "the ruling in *Gayacao vs. Executive Secretary*, L-21066, April 30, 1965, has not varied the rule, at least in so far as prohibitory writs are concerned. The *Gayacao* case conceded the power of the provincial Court of First Instance to take cognizance of cases involving judicial review of administrative decisions, where the sole issue before the Court, is 'whether the decision of respondent public officials was legally correct or not'; but it clearly reaffirmed the non-jurisdiction rulings previously cited where writs of injunction are issued or sought in order to control acts of non- resident officials." [6]

In *Palanan*, which concerned a petition for certiorari and oition filed in the Court of First Instance of Isabela against, amongst others, the Director of Forestry, the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Executive Secretary, it was thus ruled that: "Since the petition before the respondent Court of First Instance of Isabela not only questioned the legal correctness of the decision of the Office of the President, in splitting the forest concession between both contending logging companies, but also sought to enjoin enforcement of that

decision, it is evident that even under the Gayacao ruling, the respondent Court could not validly issue the writ of injunction complained of when the officials sought to be restrained were not stationed within its territory." [7]

Clearly then does the Gayacao case hold sway in the controversy before us.

Indeed, numerous are the cases where courts of first instance of provinces have rightly assumed jurisdiction over petitions to review acts of the Director of Lands and the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, both of whom may be found in Manila. For instance, in the 1949 case of *Alejo vs. Garchitorena*, 83 Phil. 924, 928, this Court impliedly upheld the power of the Court of First Instance of Nueva Ecija to review land decisions of the Director of Lands and the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

But more to the point here is the recent case of *Desiata vs. Executive Secretary*, L-21894, February 28, 1967, 19SCRA487, where we affirmed the decision of the Court of First Instance of Agusan nullifying the decision of the Executive Secretary, acting for and in behalf of the President, rendered on appeal from the decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

We hold that the Cotabato court has jurisdiction.

4. We now go to the merits of the appeal. Plaintiffs' position is that defendants' appeal to the President was time-barred. The trial court sustained. The provisions of Lands Administrative Order No. 6 are thus brought to the fore. Section 12 thereof provides:

"12. Finality of decision promulgated by the Secretary.— The decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Commerce (now Agriculture and Natural Resources) or the Under Secretary on an appealed case shall become final, unless otherwise specifically stated therein, after the lapse of thirty (30) days from the date of its receipt by the interested parties."

Section 13 following reads:

"13. No reconsideration of final decision or order.— After a decision or order of the Secretary of Agriculture and [Natural Resources], the Under Secretary or the Director of Lands has become final, no motion or petition for reconsideration of such decision or reinvestigation of the case shall be entertained by the Secretary of Agriculture and [Natural Resources], the Under Secretary or the Director of Lands, as the case may be, except as provided in Section 14 hereof."

And Section 14 is to this effect: "Upon such terms as may be considered just, the Secretary of Agriculture and [Natural Resources], the Under Secretary or the Director of Lands may relieve a party or his legal representative from a decision, order, or other proceeding taken against him through his mistake, inadvertence, surprise, default or excusable neglect: Provided, That application therefor be made within a reasonable time but in no case exceeding one (1) year after such decision, order or proceeding was taken."

Defendants do not dispute plaintiffs' averment that they (Defendants) did not move to reconsider or appeal from the Secretary's decision of October 27, 1956 - within 30 days from their receipt thereof. Indeed, they attempted to appeal only on October 23, 1957. They merely contend that their appeal was but 9 days after October 14, 1957, the date defendants received the September 12, 1957 ruling of the Secretary denying their second motion for reconsideration. That ruling, it must be remembered, drew attention to the fact that the Secretary's decision "had long become final and executory. " By reason of which, declaration was made that "this (Secretary's) Office had no more jurisdiction Certain the said motion."

It is the thesis of defendants that the power of review on appeal is inherent in the President; that the Constitution fixes no period appeal, and that, therefore, appeal can be entertained by the President even outside the 30-day period provided in Section 12, Lands Administrative Order No. 6.

Controlling in this case is *Desiata vs. Executive Secretary*, supra. *Desiata* was also a public lands case originating from the Bureau of Lands and appealed to the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources. After the decision of the Secretary, the case was taken to the Office of the President outside the 30-day period mentioned in Section 12 of Lands Administrative Order No. 6 aforequoted. The Executive Secretary revoked the decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Whereupon, the aggrieved party went to the Court of First Instance of Agusan on a special civil action for certiorari and prohibition. The Agusan court and this Court on appeal both held that there was grave abuse of discretion on the part of the Executive Secretary in entertaining the appeal from a decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources which has become final; and, therefore, the decision of the Executive Secretary was null and void. This Court stressed in clear terms that - "The decision having become final, the Executive Secretary had no more power to review it . . ."[8]

Argument has been made in *Desiata* "that Administrative Order No. 6 itself recognized certain exceptions wherein decisions of the Secretary of Agriculture do not become final even after 30 days, particularly citing Section 14 thereof." Nonetheless, this Court pronounced: "But this proviso is unavailing to him because he does not contend that in his case there obtains any of the recognized exceptions to finality listed thereunder, to wit: mistake, inadvertence, default or excusable negligence."[9]

We find no reason to retreat from the foregoing precepts enunciated by this Court in *Desiata*. Indeed, it is not contended that Lands Administrative Order No. 6 does not have the force and effect of law. Nor can it be, with success. In administrative law, an administrative regulation adopted pursuant to law, is law. Administratively speaking then, 30 days after receipt by the interested parties, the decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources becomes final, except in cases of mistake, inadvertence, surprise, default or excusable neglect. In which case, the Secretary may relieve a party of a decision, order or other proceeding taken against him upon application made within a reasonable time but in no case exceeding one (1) year after such decision, order or proceeding was taken. Defendants do not come within the exception just noted.

The executive power itself has laid down the rules for the parties in administrative conflicts to follow. To be borne in mind is that a Department Secretary is the alter ego of the President. We must assume then that an administrative rule laid down by a Department Secretary is, to all intents and purposes, that of the President, unless countermanded by the latter. It is illogical, unreasonable and unfair for the executive branch of the government itself to set aside administrative rules - unless previously changed beforehand - in a specific case for the convenience of one of the parties thereof. Closed proceedings should remain closed; vested rights should not be unsettled. A contrary view would, as correctly pointed out by plaintiffs, throw the rule of law to the winds.

In *Antique Sawmills, Inc. vs. Zayco*, L-20051, May 30, 1966, -RA 316, 320-321, we find the following pertinent passage:

"The appellees' view that the period fixed in Administrative Order No. of the Director of Forestry cannot bind the Office of the President since the latter has supervision and control over the former cannot commend itself to sound public policy. Even administrative decisions must end sometime, as public policy demands that finality be written on judicial controversies (*Manila Electric Co. vs. Public Service Commission*, 61 Phil.

In other words, public interest requires that proceedings already terminated should not be altered at every step. The rule of non *quieta movere* prescribes that What Was already terminated should not be disturbed (*Espiritu vs. San Miguel Brewery*, 63 Phil. 615).[10] We do not doubt that even the Office of the President subscribes to the above rule. As aptly remarked by Justice Malcolm in *Dy Cay vs. Crossfield & O'Brien*, 38 Phil. 527: 'Public policy and sound practice demand that, at the risk of occasional errors, judgments of courts should become final at some definite date fixed by law. The very object for which courts were instituted was to put an end to controversy. To fulfill this purpose and to do so speedily, certain time limits, more or less arbitrary,

have to be set up to spur on the slothful." "

Indeed, "[t]he rule which forbids the reopening of a matter once judicially determined by competent authority applies as well to the judicial and quasi-judicial acts of public, executive, or administrative officers and boards acting within their jurisdiction as to the judgments of courts having general judicial powers." [11]

We, accordingly, hold that the August 20, 1959 letter-decision of the Assistant Executive Secretary "by authority of the President" reversing the decision of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources in this case is null and void and of no force and effect.

For the reasons given, the lower court's decision (labeled Order) of January 31, 1963 appealed from is hereby affirmed.

No costs allowed. SO ORDERED.

Concepcion, C.J., Reyes, J.B.L., Dizon, Makalintal, Zaldivar and Barredo, JJ., concur.

Ruiz Castro and Teehankee, JJ., in the result.

Fernando, J., reserves his vote.

Villamor, J., did not take part.

[1] Civil Case 1684, Court of First Instance of Cotabato, entitled "Rafael Macailing, Silvestre Macailing, Dominico Necesito and Rafael Necesito, Plaintiffs, versus Tomas Andrada, Maria Andrada, Federico Andrada, Florencia vda. de Andrada, Jesus Andrada, Andrea A. Gaurana (Heirs of Salvador Andrada) and Assistant Executive Secretary Enrique C. Quema (in behalf of the President), Defendants."

[2] Cortes, Philippine Administrative Law, Cases and Materials, 1963 ed., PP. 300.

[3] Philippine Bank of Commerce vs. Macadaeg, L-14174, October 31, 1960; "It is true that Rule 67, Sec 1, of the Rules of Court, requires that the petition for certiorari be verified, the apparent object thereof being to insure good faith in the averments of the petition. Where, however, the material facts alleged are a matter of record in the court below, consisting in pleadings filed or proceedings taken therein, and the question raised are mainly of law, a verification as to the truth of said facts is not an absolute necessity and may be waived (42 Am. Jur., sec. 42, p. 177), as this Court has done in this case when we gave due course to the present petition. In fact, many authorities consider the absence of verification a mere formal, not jurisdiction, defect, the absence of which does not of itself justify a court in refusing to allow and act in the case (71 C.J.S., 744-745)."

[4] As amended by Resolution of this Court dated February 24, 1964, effective January 1, 1964.

[5] Then Section 2, Rule 60. That section reads:

"SEC. 2. Who may grant preliminary injunction.- A preliminary injunction may be granted by the judge of any court in which the action is pending, or by a Justice of the Court of Appeals or of the Supreme Court. It may also be granted by the judge of a Court of First Instance in any action pending in an inferior court within his district."

[6] At p. 1190.

[7] At p. 1191; italics supplied.

[8] At p. 492; italics supplied.

[9] Also at p. 492.

[10] See also: Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co. vs. Medina, L-24340-1-2-3-4, July 18, 1967, 20 SCRA 659, 673-674.

[11] Brillantes vs. Castro, 99 Phil. 497, 503, quoting 50 C.J.S., pp. 148-149. See also: Ipekjdian Merchandising Co., Inc. vs. Court of Tax. Appeals, L-15430, September 30, 1963, 9 SCRA 72,75.

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