

**FLAVIANO B. CORTES, COMPLAINANT, VS. JUDGE SEGUNDO B. CATRAL, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, BRANCH 7, APARRI, CAGAYAN, RESPONDENT.**

*A.M. No. RTJ-97-1387. September 10, 1997*

Ponente: ROMERO, J.

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**ROMERO, J.:**

Once again, the Court is asked to elucidate on the rules in the grant of the application for bail.

A sworn letter complaint was filed by Flaviano Cortes charging Judge Segundo B. Catral of the RTC of Aparri, Cagayan with Gross Ignorance of the Law committed as follows:

1. He granted bail in murder cases without hearing: *People v. Duerme, et al.*, Criminal Case No. 07-893 for murder and *People v. Rodrigo Bumanglag*, Criminal Case No. 08-866 for murder

These two cases are like the case of *Teresita Q. Tucay v. Judge Roger Domagas*, 242 SCRA 110 being classified as heinous crimes there (sic) are supposedly unbailable;

2. On May 3, 1995, Barangay Captain Rodolfo Castaneda's Criminal Case No. 11-6250 for Illegal Possession of Firearm was raffled and assigned to his sala. The provincial prosecutor granted a bailbond of P180,000.00 but it was reduced by Judge Segundo Catral for only P30,000.00. The worst part of it – no hearing has been made from 1995 to the present because according to his clerks, he is holding it in abeyance. This Barangay Captain Rodolfo Castaneda is one of the goons of Julio 'Bong' Decierto his nephew who has a pending murder case;

3. Another Barangay Captain Nilo de Rivera with a homicide case was granted with a bailbond of P14,800.00 by Judge Segundo Catral. The amount is too low. It is because this Nilo de Rivera is another goon of Julio Bong Decierto;

4. Jimmy Siriban the right hand man of Julio 'Bong' Decierto was sued for concubinage and convicted by Judge Herminio del Castillo in MTC. Jimmy Siriban appealed and it was elevated to the RTC Branch 08, the sala of Judge Segundo Catral. Judge Segundo Catral acquitted Jimmy Siriban, rumors in Aparri spread that the wife of Judge Segundo Catral went to Jimmy Siriban's house to get the envelop;"[1]

In his comment dated August 16, 1996, respondent judge branded the complainant as a "self anointed concern (sic) citizen" of Aparri, Cagayan who has gained notoriety as a character assassinator, a public nuisance and most often called speaker for hire during election time. Respondent further laments that "a 'ghost lawyer' is taking advantage of the notoriety of Mr. Flaviano Cortes by manipulating him like a robot and letting him loose like a mad dog barking on the wrong tree and biting everybody including the other members of the bench." [2]

With regard to the first charge, respondent judge, in his comment, clarified that Criminal Case No. 07-893 is the case of *People v. Willie Bumanglag y Magno* for frustrated homicide pending in Branch 7 of the Regional Trial Court of Aparri where the presiding judge is Hon. Virgilio Alameda. However, if the complainant is referring to

Ahmed Duerme y Paypon, et al., Criminal Case No. 874[3] for murder pending in Branch 7 of the RTC where respondent was then designated as presiding judge, respondent stresses that the provincial prosecutor recommended P 200,000.00 as bailbond for each of the accused. Subsequently, in a motion for reduction of bailbond, the resolution of the motion was submitted to the sound discretion of the court. The court, “mindful of the fact that the prosecution is banking on weak circumstantial evidence and guided by the factors prescribed in Section 9 of Administrative Circular 12-94[4] issued an order for reduction of the bailbond from P200,000.00 to P50,000.00.”[5]

In the case of *People v. Rodrigo Bumanglag*, Criminal Case 08-866 for murder, the inquest judge issued a warrant of arrest for the accused with no bail recommended. When the case was elevated to the Regional Trial Court upon information filed by the provincial prosecutor, the information made no mention of a bailbond. In the hearing of the petition to determine whether or not the evidence of guilt is strong, the fiscal opted not to introduce evidence and recommended bail in the sum of P200,000.00 instead. Respondent judge “acting on the said recommendation and again guided by the provision of Section 9, Administrative Circular 12-94 in conjunction with the evidence extant on the record approved the recommendation of Prosecutor Apolinar Carrao.” [6] A duplicate copy of trial prosecutor Apolinar Carrao’s letter dated September 3, 1996 addressed to the provincial prosecutor Romeo Sacquing was presented by the respondent to disprove the accusation that he granted bail to the accused without conducting any hearing.[7]

As regards the third charge concerning the illegal possession of firearm against Barangay Captain Rodolfo Castaneda, the bailbond recommended by the prosecutor was P180,000.00. Accused, through counsel Atty. Bulseco, filed a motion for reduction of the bailbond to P30,000.00. Counsel even vouched and guaranteed the appearance of the accused in court, whenever required. The motion for reduction of bailbond was submitted without serious opposition and the prosecutor “mindful perhaps that there is no corpus of the crime as no firearm was caught or taken from the possession of the accused merely submitted the same to the discretion of the court.”[8]

In Criminal Case No. 08-915 concerning a homicide case against Barangay Captain Nilo de Rivero, respondent judge says that the bailbond of P14,800.00 was recommended by the acting Officer-In-Charge (OIC) as contained in his manifestation accompanying the information.[9] Respondent judge then “acting on the recommendation of the OIC provincial prosecutor and mindful of the guidelines in fixing a reasonable amount of bailbond coupled by the fact that the evidence on record is merely circumstantial and there was no eyewitness to the commission of crime granted bailbond in the sum of P14,800.00.”[10]

Finally, respondent judge says the accusation regarding the acquittal of one Jimmy Siriban is simply the product of a dirty imagination and is a dirty trick intended to defame the name of his family by rumor mongers who are unwilling to come out in the open to substantiate their accusation.

On September 9, 1996, respondent submitted his additional comment dated September 5, 1996 informing the Office of the Court Administrator that Criminal Case No. 07-784, referred to in the letter complainant (sic) of Mr. Flaviano Cortes, has already been dismissed by Judge Virgilio Alameda, RTC, Branch 07, Aparri Cagayan, in his order dated August 16, 1996. [11] Respondent judge stresses that, as can be gleaned from the penultimate paragraph of said order, the accused, despite reduction of their bailbonds, remained detention prisoners because of their failure to post bond. In his original comment, respondent stated, among others, that the evidence against the accused in Criminal Case No. 07-874 was based on weak circumstantial evidence which prompted the court to grant them a reduced bailbond of P50,000.00. Respondent judge noted that the complaining witnesses never appeared despite the fact that the case had been set for hearing several times.

The Office of the Court Administrator recommended the dismissal of the complaint saying that there is nothing in the allegations of the complainant that would warrant the imposition of administrative sanction against respondent judge.

In recommending the dismissal of the complaint against respondent judge, the Office of the Court Administrator noted, “x x x complainant failed to show any indication that bad faith motivated the actuation of the respondent in granting and reducing the amount of bail of the accused in some of the criminal cases that were assigned in his sala. x x x it is crystal clear that the increase or reduction of bail rests in the sound discretion of the court depending upon the particular circumstances of the case. It should be noted further that the reduction in the amount of bail of the accused in the criminal cases in question were all done by the respondent with the knowledge and conformity of the Public Prosecutor concerned. Moreover, the actions taken by the respondent were in the exercise of judicial discretion that may not be assailed in an administrative proceedings (sic).”[12]

We do not agree.

Bail is the security required by the court and given by the accused to ensure that the accused appears before the proper court at the scheduled time and place to answer the charges brought against him or her. It is awarded to the accused to honor the presumption of innocence until his guilt is proven beyond reasonable doubt, and to enable him to prepare his defense without being subject to punishment prior to conviction.[13]

Bail should be fixed according to the circumstances of each case. The amount fixed should be sufficient to ensure the presence of the accused at the trial yet reasonable enough to comply with the constitutional provision that bail should not be excessive. [14] Therefore, whether bail is a matter of right or of discretion, reasonable notice of hearing is required to be given to the prosecutor or fiscal or at least he must be asked for his recommendation because in fixing the amount of bail, the judge is required to take into account a number of factors such as the applicant’s character and reputation, forfeiture of other bonds or whether he is a fugitive from justice.[15]

When a person is charged with an offense punishable by death, reclusion perpetua or life imprisonment, bail is a matter of discretion. Rule 114, Section 7 of the Rules of Court states: “No person charged with a capital offense, or an offense punishable by reclusion perpetua or life imprisonment when the evidence of guilt is strong, shall be admitted to bail regardless of the stage of the criminal action.” Consequently, when the accused is charged with an offense punishable by death, reclusion perpetua or life imprisonment, the judge is mandated to conduct a hearing, whether summary or otherwise in the discretion of the court, not only to take into account the guidelines set forth in Section 9, Rule 114 of the Rules of Court, but primarily to determine the existence of strong evidence of guilt or lack of it, against the accused.

“A summary hearing means such brief and speedy method of receiving and considering the evidence of guilt as is practicable and consistent with the purpose of hearing which is merely to determine the weight of evidence for purposes of bail. On such hearing, the court does not sit to try the merits or to enter into any nice inquiry as to the weight that ought to be allowed to the evidence for or against the accused, nor will it speculate on the outcome of the trial or on what further evidence may be therein offered or admitted. The course of inquiry may be left to the discretion of the court which may confine itself to receiving such evidence as has reference to substantial matters, avoiding unnecessary thoroughness in the examination and cross examination.”[16]

Respondent judge, in two instances, granted bail to an accused charged with murder, without having conducted any hearing as to whether the evidence of guilt against the accused is strong.

In the case of *People v. Ahmed Duerme y Paypon, et al.*, Criminal Case No. 874, accused Ahmed Duerme together with four other persons were charged with the crime of murder. The provincial prosecutor recommended

the sum of P200,000.00 as bailbond for each accused.[17] The records do not reveal whether a hearing was actually conducted on the application for bail although respondent judge implies that there was one, stating that “acting on this recommendation of the provincial prosecutor and taking into account the guidelines prescribed in Section 9 of Administrative Circular 12-94, the court issued a warrant of arrest and fixed the amount of P200,000.00 for the provisional liberty of each of the accused.”[18] Subsequently, counsel for accused Ahmed Duerme filed a motion for reduction of bail. The “hearing” of the motion was conducted on August 21, 1995 with the prosecution, not having interposed any opposition, and submitting the resolution of the motion to the sound discretion of the court instead. Respondent judge then issued an order granting a reduced bailbond of P50,000.00 for accused Ahmed Duerme inasmuch as “the evidence was not so strong to warrant the fixation of said amount.”[19] Respondent judge, in his comment, disclosed that the prosecution was banking on weak circumstantial evidence since there was no eyewitness to the commission of the offense as borne out from the affidavits and sworn statements of the prosecution witnesses.[20] The order granting the reduced bailbond, however, did not contain a summary of the evidence for the prosecution.[21]

In the case of *People v. Rodrigo Bumanglag*, Criminal Case No. 08-866, accused Bumanglag was charged with murder in a criminal complaint filed before the Municipal Trial Court of Sta. Ana, Cagayan. After conducting a preliminary investigation, the inquest judge issued a warrant of the arrest for the accused with no bail recommended. When the case was elevated to the Regional Trial Court, the information made no mention of a bailbond. Consequently, accused through counsel filed a petition for bail. In the hearing of the petition to determine whether or not the evidence of guilt against the accused was strong, the fiscal opted not to introduce evidence and recommended the sum of P200,000.00 instead.[22] Respondent judge, “acting on said recommendation and again guided by the provision of Section 9, Administrative Circular 12-94 in conjunction with the evidence extant on record,” issued an order granting bail to the accused in the sum of P200,000.00.[23] Unable to post the said bond, accused through counsel filed a motion to reduce bail.[24] In the course of the hearing of the petition, the public prosecutor manifested that he had no objection to the sum of P50,000.00 as bail for the accused. Respondent judge, then “guided by the factual setting and the supporting evidence extant on record”[25] reduced the bail bond from P200,000.00 to P50,000.00 as recommended by the prosecutor. Once again, the order granting the bail of P200,000.00, as well as the reduced bail bond of P50,000.00, did not contain a summary of the evidence presented by the prosecution.

Respondent judge insists that in the aforecited cases, a hearing was actually conducted on the application and motion for reduction of bail, but the public prosecutor opted not to introduce evidence and submitted the resolution of the petition, as well as the motion for reduction of bail, to the sound discretion of the court instead. Respondent observed that since it is a basic principle of procedure that the prosecution of criminal cases is under the direct control and supervision of the fiscal or prosecutor, would it be procedurally proper for the court to compel prosecutor Apolinar Carrao, the public prosecutor assigned in the case of *People v. Rodrigo Bumanlag*, Criminal Case No. 08-866, to prove the evidence of guilt of the accused for the crime of murder when the prosecutor candidly admitted in open court that in his honest view, the strength of evidence on hand for the state can only prove the crime of homicide and not murder?[26]

In the recent case of *Inocencio Basco v. Judge Leo M. Rapatalo*,[27] this court ruled that “x x x the judge is mandated to conduct a hearing even in cases where the prosecution chooses to just file a comment or leave the application of bail to the sound discretion of the court. A hearing is likewise required if the prosecution refuses to adduce evidence in opposition to the application to grant and fix bail. The importance of a hearing has been emphasized in not a few cases wherein the court ruled that, even if the prosecution refuses to adduce evidence or fails to interpose an objection to the motion for bail, it is still mandatory for the court to conduct a hearing or ask searching questions from which it may infer the strength of the evidence of guilt, or the lack of it against the

accused.”

The reason for this is plain. Inasmuch as the determination of whether or not the evidence of guilt against the accused is strong is a matter of judicial discretion, It may rightly be exercised only after the evidence is submitted to the court at the hearing. Since the discretion is directed to the weight of evidence and since evidence cannot properly be weighed if not duly exhibited or produced before the court,[28] it is obvious that a proper exercise of judicial discretion requires that the evidence of guilt be submitted to the court, the petitioner having the right of cross examination and to introduce evidence in his own rebuttal.[29]

Respondent judge justifies the grant of bail in the two cases by stating that the prosecutor recommended the grant of bail. Respondent also added that in the case of *People v. Ahmed Duerme*, there were no eyewitnesses to the commission of the offense as borne out from the affidavits and sworn statements of the witnesses.[30] As a matter of fact, the case had already been dismissed for failure to prosecute by Judge Alameda inasmuch as the prosecutor himself admitted that there was lack of interest on the part of the witnesses to pursue the case and not a single witness ever went to court to see him.[31]

The fact that Criminal Case No. 07-874 was subsequently dismissed by Judge Alameda does not completely exculpate respondent judge. We need only remind him that he is not bound by the recommendation of the prosecutor and the affidavits and sworn statements of the witnesses are mere hearsay statements which could hardly be the basis for determining whether or not the evidence of guilt against the accused is strong.

Worth noting, too, is the fact that the order granting the application, as well as the reduction for bail the aforementioned cases, did not contain a summary of the evidence presented by the prosecution. In Criminal Case No. 07-874, respondent only arrived at the conclusion that "the evidence was not so strong to warrant the fixation of said amount"[32] and the observation that: "When the hearing of this petition was called, some legal skirmishes arose between the Prosecutor and the Defense Counsel, after which, the prosecutor out of humanitarian reason yielded and manifested that he is amenable that the accused be admitted to bail in the amount of P200,000.00" in Criminal Case No. 08-866.[33] Well settled in a number of cases[34] is the rule that the court's order granting or refusing bail must contain a summary of the evidence for the prosecution, otherwise the order granting or denying bail may be invalidated because the summary of the evidence for the prosecution which contains the judge's evaluation of the evidence may be considered as an aspect of procedural due process for both the prosecution and the defense.

The procedural lapse of respondent judge is aggravated by the fact that even though the accused in Criminal Case No. 07-874, *People v. Ahmed Duerme*, have yet to be arrested, respondent already fixed bail in the sum of P200,000.00. Respondent evidently knew that the accused were still at large as he even had to direct their arrest in the same order where he simultaneously granted them bail.[35] At this juncture, there is a need to reiterate the basic principle that the right to bail can only be availed of by a person who is in custody of the law or otherwise deprived of his liberty[36] and it would be premature, not to say incongruous, to file a petition for bail for some whose freedom has yet to be curtailed.

With regard to the third charge filed against respondent judge, we adopt the findings of the Office of the Court Administrator that the complainant failed to show that bad faith motivated the actuation of respondent judge in reducing the amount of bail in Criminal Case No. 11250 for Illegal Possession of Firearm against Barangay Captain Rodolfo Castaneda. Respondent judge, in granting and subsequently reducing the recommended bailbond of P180,000.00 considered the fact that there was no corpus of the crime as no firearm was taken from the possession of the accused, as well as the fact that counsel for the accused vouched and guaranteed the appearance of the accused in court whenever required.[37] Moreover, records show that, contrary to the allegations of the

complainant, the trial of the case had already been set for hearing but on more than one occasion, the defense counsel, as well as the prosecutor, both moved to have it reset.[38]

In Criminal Case No. 08-915 for homicide filed against accused Nilo de Rivera, complainant alleges that the amount of P14,800.00 granted by respondent as bailbond of the accused is too low. Respondent judge stresses that the amount was recommended by the prosecutor and not *motu proprio* by the trial court. Respondent added that the amount of bail was appropriate inasmuch as it was fixed in accordance with the guidelines set forth in Section 9 of Administrative Circular 12-94. As long as in fixing the amount of bail, the court is guided by the purpose for which bail is required, that is, to secure the appearance of the accused to answer charges brought against him, the decision of the court to grant bail in the sum it deems appropriate will not be interfered with.

With respect to the last charge, we adopt the findings of the office of the Court Administrator that there is nothing in the record to substantiate the allegation of the complainant that the acquittal of a certain Jimmy Siriban by respondent judge was tainted with irregularity. Other than his bare allegation, complainant has yet to present evidence as to any irregularity committed by respondent judge in acquitting Mr. Siriban.

In sum, we find respondent Judge Segundo B. Catral guilty of gross ignorance of the law for having granted bail to the accused in Criminal Cases No. 07-874 and 08-866 without having conducted the requisite hearing. It is indeed surprising, not to say, alarming, that the Court should be besieged with a number of administrative cases filed against erring judges involving bail. After all, there is no dearth of jurisprudence on the basic principles involving bail. As a matter of fact, the Court itself, through its Philippine Judicial Academy, has been including lectures on the subject in the regular seminars conducted for judges. Be that as it may, we reiterate the following duties of the trial judge in case an application for bail is filed:

1. In all cases, whether bail is a matter of right or of discretion, notify the prosecutor of the hearing of the application for bail or require him to submit his recommendation (Section 18, Rule 114 of the Rules of Court as amended);
2. Where bail is a matter of discretion, conduct a hearing of the application for bail regardless of whether or not the prosecution refuses to present evidence to show that the guilt of the accused is strong for the purpose of enabling the court to exercise its sound discretion; (Section 7 and 8, *supra*)
3. Decide whether the guilt of the accused is strong based on the summary of evidence of the prosecution;
4. If the guilt of the accused is not strong, discharge the accused upon the approval of the bailbond (Section 19, *supra*) Otherwise petition should be denied.”[39]

With such succinct but clear rules now incorporated in the Rules of Court, trial judges are enjoined to study them as well and be guided accordingly. Admittedly, judges cannot be held to account for an erroneous decision rendered in good faith, but this defense is much too frequently cited even if not applicable. A number of cases on bail having already been decided, this Court justifiably expects judges to discharge their duties assiduously. For judge is called upon to exhibit more than just a cursory acquaintance with statutes and procedural rules; it is imperative that he be conversant with basic legal principles. Faith in the administration of justice can only be engendered if litigants are convinced that the members of the Bench cannot justly be charge with a deficiency in their grasp of legal principles.

WHEREFORE, in view of the foregoing, respondent Judge Segundo B. Catral is hereby ORDERED to pay a fine P20,000.00 with the WARNING that a repetition of the same or similar acts in the future will be dealt with more severely.

SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, C.J., Davide, Jr., Bellosillo, Melo, Puno, Vitug, Kapunan, Mendoza, Francisco, Hermosisima, Jr., Panganiban, and Torres, Jr., JJ., concur.

Regalado, J., no part, on leave during deliberations.

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[1] Rollo, p. 83.

[2] Rollo, p. 18.

[3] Criminal Case No. 07-874 is actually “People of the Philippines v. Edgardo Fernando y Caddarao @ ‘Gardo’, Cenon Duerme y Orel, Ahmed Duerme y Paypon, Roberto Duerme @ ‘Berto’/’Berting’ and Florante Duerme y Saguitan @ ‘Berong’” but for purposes of this case, Criminal Case No. 07-874 shall be referred to as “People v. Ahmed Duerme.”

[4] Rule 114 of the Rules of Court on Bail was amended by the Supreme Court in its Resolution dated August 16, 1994, the amendments of which took effect on October 1, 1994.

[5] Rollo, p. 14.

[6] Rollo, p. 15.

[7] Rollo, pp. 91-92.

[8] Rollo, p. 16.

[9] Rollo, p. 80.

[10] Rollo, pp. 17-18.

[11] Rollo, p.113.

[12] Rollo, p. 5.

[13] *Stack v. Boyle*, 342 US 1; 96 L ED 3, 72 S Ct. 1; *Dudley v. US*, 242 F 2d 656.

[14] Article III, Section 13, 1987 Constitution.

[15] Section 9, Rule 114 of the Rules of Court. See also *Asst. Prosecutor Antonio Chin v. Judge Tito G. Gustilo, et al.*, A.M. No. 94-1243, August 11, 1995.

[16] *Siazon v. Presiding Judge, et al.*, 42 SCRA 184 (1971).

[17] Annex F, Rollo, p. 50.

[18] Rollo, p. 13.

[19] Annex 1; Rollo, p. 55.

[20] Rollo, p. 14.

[21] Annex 1; Rollo, p. 55.

[22] Annex A- A-7; Rollo, pp. 115-122.

[23] Annex O; Rollo, p. 65.

[24] Annex P, Rollo, pp. 66-68.

[25] Rollo, p. 15.

[26] Rollo, p. 87.

[27] A.M. No. RTJ-96-1335, promulgated March 5, 1997.

[28] Basco v. Rapatalo, *supra*, citing Ramos v. Ramos, 45 Phil. 362.

[29] Basco v. Rapatalo, *supra*, citing Ocampo v. Bernabe, 77 Phil. 55.

[30] Rollo, p. 113.

[31] Rollo, pp. 167-168.

[32] Rollo, p. 55.

[33] Rollo, p. 65.

[34] See *People v. San Diego*, 26 SCRA 52; *People v. Nano*, 205 SCRA 155; *Guillermo v. Reyes*, 240 SCRA 154; *Santos v. Ofilada*, 245 SCRA 56; *Carpio v. Maglalang*, 196 SCRA 41; *Basco v. Rapatalo*, A.M. No. RTJ-96-1335, March 5, 1997.

[35] Annex E; Rollo, p. 49.

[36] *Feliciano v. Pasicolan*, 75 Phil 634 (1961); *Manigbas v. Luna*, 98 SCRA 466 (1956); *De los Santos Reyes v. Montesa Jr.*, 247 SCRA 85 (1995).

[37] Annex R; Rollo, pp. 70-72.

[38] Annexes U, V, W and X; Rollo, pp. 76-79.

[39] *Basco v. Repatalo*, *supra*.

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