

ANONYMOUS, COMPLAINANT, VS. JUDY ANN V. BAHIA, COURT INTERPRETER III OF BRANCH 273, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, MARIKINA CITY, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. P-26-390 [Formerly OCA IPI No. 19-4946-P], June 10, 2026

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PER CURIAM:

For resolution of this Court is an administrative complaint against respondent Judy Ann V. Bahia (Bahia), Court Interpreter III of Branch 273, Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Marikina City (Branch 273) misconduct, stemming from allegations of extortion.

Antecedents

The instant case finds its genesis from an undated Anonymous Complaint[1] received by the Office: of the Court Administrator (OCA) on December 11, 2017. The substantive portion of the Complaint reads:

Pasensya na po kung sa inyo na ako lalapit. Gusto ko lang po ipaabot sa inyo na ako ay sumulat sa Judge at Attorney ng RTC 193 sa Marikina kaugnay sa ginawang paghingi ni Mam Judy Ann Bahia ng pera sa aking Tito (Mr. Suller) [sic] kapalit daw po ng pag asikaso niya sa kaso ni Tito dahil kakilala daw po nya yung judge doon. Sa kagustuhan naman po ni Tito na maayos nga ang kaso niya at sa tiwala na din po niya sa magandang paliwanag ni Mam Judy siya po ay nagbigay ng ilang tseke para daw po maibigay ang katumbas na halaga nito kay Judge. Nagulat lang po kami dahil sa kakabigay lang po kay Mam Judy ng tseke e nagtetest na naman po siya kay Tito at nanghihingi na naman po ng pera para naman daw po doon sa attorney. . . .[2] (Emphasis supplied)

On February 5, 2018, the OCA directed Executive Judge Shirley Magsipoc-Pagalilauan (Judge Magsipoc-Pagalilauan) to conduct a discreet investigation and to submit a report thereon.[3]

In her May 22, 2018 Investigation Report,[4] Judge Magsipoc-Pagalilauan stated that she invited Mr. Ysmael Soller (Soller) and his counsel, Atty. Cesar Turiano (Atty. Turiano), for a conference on April 27, 2018. Soller denied having sent the Anonymous Complaint but admitted that he received a call from Bahia who offered to help him with his estafa case pending before Branch 193, RTC of Marikina City (Branch 193). Bahia claimed that she knew Presiding Judge Alice Gutierrez (Judge Gutierrez) of Branch 193. Soller allegedly rejected the offer and insisted that he never gave any money or issued any check to Bahia.[5]

Judge Magsipoc-Pagalilauan also interviewed Prosecutor Elvira Adarlo (Prosecutor Adarlo), former clerk of court of Branch 193. Prosecutor Adarlo narrated that on August 15, 2017, she received an anonymous letter stating in essence that Bahia was asking for money from Soller for her help with his estafa case. Accordingly, Judge Gutierrez instructed Prosecutor Adarlo to conduct an investigation.[6]

Prosecutor Adario interviewed Rowena Desiderio (Desiderio), a stenographer of Branch 273 and, allegedly, the erstwhile best friend of Bahia. Desiderio disclosed that Bahia indeed received money from Soller.[7]

Desiderio narrated that as Soller's friend, she helped him to secure the services of Atty. Turiano. In turn, Atty.

Turiano offered a referral fee, which Desiderio expressly declined. Desiderio later discovered that Atty. Turiano handed the referral fee to Bahia, who pocketed the same.[8]

Soller confirmed to Desiderio that he gave money and issued several checks to Bahia in the total amount of PHP 70,000.00, more or less. Soller described his experience as if he was hypnotized or nabudol by Bahia, and sought Desiderio's help in recovering the money from Bahia. Desiderio confronted Bahia over the checks. Desiderio was able to recover one check for the amount of PHP 20,000.00 as Bahia already encashed the other two checks.[9]

During the course of the investigation, a certain court employee/former public prosecutor of Marikina City, disclosed to Judge Magsipoc-Pagalilauan two other incidents where Bahia extorted money from party-litigants. The said informant alleged that Bahia solicited money from her husband's client by using his name, without his prior authorization. Regarding the other incident, Bahia allegedly did the same thing to a certain Atty. Montoya.[10]

In its June 19, 2018 Memorandum,[11] the Legal Office, OCA, recommended that the Anonymous Complaint be docketed for purposes of an informal preliminary inquiry for grave misconduct.

In her Answer/Comment,[12] Bahia denied the allegations hurled against her. She averred that she has been in the Judiciary since 1992 with an untainted service record. She further mentioned that she has a family reputation to protect considering that her mother is a retired division chief of the Quezon City Prosecutor's Office, and her husband is presently the assistant division chief.

In its December 9, 2020 Report,[13] the OCA recommended to the Court that the Anonymous Complaint be referred to the executive judge of the RTC of Marikina City for investigation, report, and recommendation. In its February 8, 2021 Resolution,[14] the Court adopted the recommendation. The records of the case were thereafter transmitted to Executive Judge Romeo D. Tagra (Judge Tagra).[15]

Report and Recommendation of the Investigating Judge

In his December 28, 2022 Report and Recommendation,[16] Judge Tagra recommended that Bahia be suspended for three months without salary and other benefits. The recommendation reads:

Consequently, taking into account all the foregoing considerations, it is respectfully recommended that the respondent shall be imposed with the penalty of Suspension from Office without salary and other benefits for a period of three (3) months.

Respectfully submitted.[17] (Emphasis in the original)

Judge Tagra explained that the denial of Soller was self-defeating to the defense of Bahia. He stated that during the April 27, 2018 informal conference; Soller admitted that Bahia called him over the phone and offered to help him in his estafa case.[18]

Judge Tagra also noted the following admissions made by Soller: (1) he had a chance meeting with Bahia inside a kainan at the Marikina Hotel; (2) Bahia called him by phone during which they were able to talk to each other; (3) during the phone call, they discussed his estafa case; (4) Bahia offered to help him; and (5) Bahia warned him that he needed to do something because the adverse party will rig the case against him and if he gets convicted, he will be imprisoned for a minimum period of 18 years.[19]

Notably, when Bahia testified on November 3, 2022, she confirmed that she called Soller and discussed the latter's case. Thus, when Soller suddenly denied meeting and/or knowing Bahia during the November 10, 2022 hearing, Judge Tagra already knew that Soller was lying.[20]

Further, Judge Tagra considered the positive assertion and testimony of Desiderio, as corroborated by Prosecutor

Adarlo, who testified that Bahia confessed to her and Judge Gutierrez that she encashed the check worth PHP20,000.00.[21]

It was submitted that Bahia cannot be held responsible for grave misconduct since her act of demanding money from Soller was unrelated to her functions as a court interpreter. Nonetheless, Judge Tagra still found Bahia liable for serious dishonesty and conduct that gravely besmirches or taints the reputation of the service.[22]

Recommendation of the Office of the General Counsel (OGC)

Pursuant to Rule 140, as amended, the Judicial Integrity Board (JIB) referred the Anonymous Complaint to the OGC-JIB.

In its July 27, 2023 Memorandum,[23] the OGC-JIB found that the material allegations in the Anonymous Complaint were sufficiently established through substantial evidence. However, the OGC-JIB recommended that Bahia be charged with bribery. The Recommendation reads:

WHEREFORE, the Office of the General Counsel hereby CHARGES JUDY ANN V. BAHIA, Court Interpreter III, Branch 273, Regional Trial Court, Marikina City, with Bribery.

Respectfully submitted.[24] (Emphasis in the original)

In her September 4, 2023 Comment[25], Bahia denied the allegations. against her and insisted that she cannot be held liable for either direct or indirect bribery. She argued that it had already been established by Soller's testimony that she did not receive directly or indirectly some gift, offer, or promise from him. Bahia also highlighted the inconsistencies in Desiderio's testimony.[26]

She reiterated that her service records are untainted and insisted that she never even thought of committing any violation that would adversely affect her retirement benefits.[27]

Report and Recommendation of the JIB

In its April 22, 2024 Report and Recommendation,[28] the JIB recommended the suspension of Bahia. The recommendation reads:

It is respectfully recommended for the consideration of the Honorable Board that the instant complaint be RE-DOCKETED as a regular administrative matter against respondent Judy Ann V. Bahia, Court Interpreter III, Branch 273, Regional Trial Court, Marikina City, and the following recommendations be made to the Supreme Court:

1.)

respondent Bahia be found GUILTY of Gross Misconduct constituting violations of the Conduct for Court Personnel and be meted with a penalty of SUSPENSION from office without salary and other benefits for ELEVEN (11) MONTHS;

2.)

respondent Bahia be STERNLY WARNED that a repetition of the same or similar offense shall warrant her dismissal from the service by the Supreme Court.[29] (Emphasis in the original)

In essence, the JIB adopted the findings of Judge Tagra but modified the charges against Bahia. Instead of charging her with bribery, the JIB found that her act of receiving money from Soller amounted to gross misconduct constituting violations of the Code of Conduct.[30]

The JIB noted that Soller initially admitted before Judge Magsipoc-Pagalilauan that he knew Bahia after the latter offered to help him with his pending estafa case by talking to Judge Gutierrez. It also noted Bahia's admission

before Judge Tagra that she initiated communication with Soller to discuss with him his estafa case.[31]

As regards the penalty, the JIB considered the mitigating circumstances of first offense, and length of service of at least 10 years with no previous disciplinary record where Bahia was meted with an administrative penalty.[32]

Issue

Whether respondent should be held administratively liable.

Ruling of the Court

After a careful review of the records, the Court adopts the findings and recommendation of the JIB, with modification.

Preliminarily, it is noted that the acts imputed to respondent were committed before the promulgation of A.M. No. 25-06-11-SC, or the 2025 Code of Conduct and Accountability for Court Officials and Personnel (CCACOP), which took effect on December 21, 2025. Section 1 of the General Provisions of the CCACOP[33] allows for its retroactive application. Accordingly, the CCACOP shall be applied in resolving the present case.

In administrative cases, the required quantum of evidence is substantial evidence, or that amount of relevant evidence which a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.[34]

The pieces of evidence reveal that Soller knew respondent, and that the latter indeed received money from him. To recall, during the April 27, 2018 informal conference, Soller already admitted that he received a call from respondent and the latter offered some help in relation to his estafa case in view of her familiarity with the judge presiding over said case, viz.:

....

Q:

Sumampa na sa court?

A:

Opo, may tumawag nga po sa akin yun nga po nagpakilala siya na siya si Judy eh nagtataka ako...

Court:

Q:

Kung paano nya nalaman?

A:

Opo tapos yun nga nag umpisa na ano matutulungan kita diyan sa case mo minsan na nga may panakot pa siya eh na baka yang case mo pinakamababa diyan 18 years mga ganon tapos isa pang ano po nya sabi nya sa akin yung kalaban mo ilalakad yung ano iginagapang yung case kaya naalarma po aka dun ganon pa yun po yung pinag-umpisahan.[35]

....

Q:

Tapos after nun?

A:

Yun nga po, nag-offer na siya ng...

Q:

Na matulungan ka, anong klaseng tulong, iyong ano offer nya?

A:

Eh kilala niya daw po si ano...

Q:

Judge Gutierrez?

A:

Opo[.][36] (Emphasis supplied)

While Soller later contradicted his earlier admission and denied knowing or having any involvement with respondent, it is clear to the Court that he changed his tune to avoid any possible repercussions against himself. In fact, Soller confided to Desiderio that he no longer wanted to pursue respondent, as it might only further complicate his estafa case and cause him additional stress:

Court:

Si Mr. Soller ayaw naman niyang kasuhan o ayaw Nyang magfile ng case...

Witness:

Ayaw na po Judge kasi alam nya na kaibigan ko, sabi nya ibalik nya na lang Weng yung pera ayaw ko na ng gulo tsaka masyado akong mapapagod...

Court:

Oo kasi naisip nga nya yung case nya tapos dadagdagan pa...

Witness:

Opo, may problem na nga ako dadagdagan ko pa, ayoko na pera lang yan, sabi nya kikitain ko pa yan[.][37] (Emphasis in the original)

It is also worth noting that respondent herself admitted before Judge Tagra that she initiated communication with Soller:

Investigating Judge: Okay So, who brought to the conversation the fact that Mr. Soller had a case before Branch 193?

Ms. Bahia: Ako po. Sabi ko, May case po pala kayo sa Branch 193.

....

Investigating Judge: ... What can you say to these statements of Mr. Soller that the conversation between you and himself centered on you telling him to, quote unquote, make "lakad" with his case because the other party is also, quote unquote, making "lakad at kung hindi niya Lala Karin pinakamababang sentensiya is 18 years." What can you say to this?

Ms. Bahia: Ang sinabi ko po sa kanya na 'yung ... 'yung... Sinabi ko po sa kanya na kailangang kausapin nya po 'yung private complainant dahil 'yun lang ang makakatulong sa kanya. Kasi sabi ko sa Estafa case depended sa amount. May 10 years, 12 years, 15 years, 18 years.[38]

Indeed, Soller's and respondent's admissions, coupled with the testimonies of Desiderio and Prosecutor Adarlo, satisfy the threshold of substantial evidence required in administrative proceedings. The acts of respondent demanding and receiving money from Soller, in exchange for rendering assistance with his estafa case, were

clearly established. Respondent's plain denial of the charges against her cannot overcome the categorical and positive assertions and testimonies of Soller, Desiderio, and Prosecutor Adarlo.

For the said acts, respondent is being charged with gross misconduct, which, under Canon V, Section 18 of the CCACOP, is classified as a serious offense.

In *Office of the Court Administrator v. Del Rosario*,^[39] the Court defined misconduct as a transgression of some established and definite rule of action, more particularly, unlawful behavior or gross negligence by the public officer. It is intentional wrongdoing or deliberate violation of a rule of law or standard of behavior. To warrant dismissal from service, the misconduct must be grave, serious, important, weighty, momentous, and not trifling. In grave misconduct, as differentiated from simple misconduct, the elements of corruption, clear intent to violate the law or flagrant disregard of established rules, must be manifest and established by substantial evidence.^[40] Here, the elements of corruption, clear intent to violate the law or flagrant disregard of established rules, must be manifest and established by substantial evidence.

Respondent's actuations are in clear violation of several sections of Canon II of the CCACOP, particularly:

CANON II

Propriety

....

SECTION 3. Prohibition Against Claim of Influence. — Court officials and personnel shall not make it appear that they have the power to influence or affect the outcome of a case or any other matter pending before their office.

SECTION 4. Prohibition Against Improper Communications. — Except on official matters when allowed by the rules, court officials and personnel shall not communicate with lawyers, litigants, or their representatives, including on any social networking platform, on any pending matter before their office.

....

SECTION 12. Prohibited Acts Involving the Discharge of Duties. — When discharging their duties, court officials and personnel shall not:

....

(f) Directly or indirectly solicit or accept from court users, lawyers, litigants, or third parties dealing with the Judiciary, any gift, bequest, or favor, of any value on any occasion, except unsolicited gifts of small or insignificant value as a mere token of gratitude or friendship according to local customs and usage;

....

Respondent clearly violated the aforementioned prohibitions when she solicited money from Soller in exchange for rendering assistance with his estafa case.

To be sure, it is beyond respondent's responsibility to communicate with party-litigants and to solicit anything from them. In *Judge Silapan v. Alcala*,^[41] the Court had the opportunity to discuss the duties of a court interpreter:

Under general supervision, acts as translator of the Court; attends all court hearings; administers oath to witnesses; marks and keeps under the direction of the Clerk of Court/Branch Clerk of Court all exhibits submitted in evidence; prepares all minutes of the court session; maintains and keeps in custody a record book of cases calendared for hearing; and performs such other duties as may be assigned by the Judge and/or Clerk of Court.^[42]

From the foregoing, respondent's main duty as a court interpreter is to act as the translator of the court. She clearly had no official business in contacting party-litigants such as Soller, and even less so offering help with pending cases and soliciting money from litigants.

Respondent should also be held liable for making it appear that she could, through her familiarity with Judge Gutierrez, influence the latter with the resolution of Soller's pending estafa case in exchange for money, which constitutes grave misconduct.[43]

At this point, the Court finds it timely to underscore once more that no less than the Constitution mandates that all public officers and employees should serve with responsibility, integrity and efficiency. Indeed, public office is a public trust.[44] Employees of the Judiciary, from the justices to the lowliest worker, serve as sentinels of justice. Any act of impropriety on their part greatly affects the honor and dignity of the Judiciary and the people's confidence in it. The Institution demands the best possible people in the service and it will never tolerate nor condone any conduct which would violate the norms of public accountability, and diminish, or even tend to diminish, the people's faith in the justice system.[45]

Penalty

As regards the penalty, Canon V, Section 22 of the CCACOP provides that if the respondent is found guilty of a serious offense, any of the following penalties may be imposed:

a)

Dismissal from the service, forfeiture of all or part of the benefits as the Supreme Court may determine, and disqualification from reinstatement or appointment to any public office, including in government-owned or -controlled corporations. Provided, however, that the forfeiture of benefits shall in no case include accrued leave credits;

b)

Suspension from office without salary and other benefits for one year and one day up to two years; and/or

c)

A fine of more than PHP 101,000.00 but not more than PHP 500,000.00.

In determining the appropriate penalty to be imposed, the Court, may, in its discretion, appreciate mitigating and aggravating circumstances.[46]

While the JIB considered in respondent's favor two mitigating circumstances—the fact that this was her first offense, and the length of her service—the Court holds that the latter cannot be appreciated in her favor. Her 34 years of service in the court cannot serve to mitigate her offense but could in fact be appreciated as aggravating since it facilitated the commission of the offense, i.e., by the use of her "connections" in the court due to her familiarity with the system and other employees in the Judiciary.[47]

Through the years, the Court has received numerous administrative complaints involving court personnel who solicit money from party-litigants. However, there is no defense that would justify asking or receiving money from party litigants. The act itself makes any court employee guilty of grave misconduct. Thus, they must bear the penalty of dismissal.[48]

ACCORDINGLY, the Court finds respondent Judy Ann V. Bahia, Court Interpreter III of Branch 273, Regional Trial Court, Marikina City, GUILTY of gross misconduct constituting violations of the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel and imposes upon her the penalty of DISMISSAL from service, with FORFEITURE, of all

retirement benefits, except accrued leave credits, and with prejudice to her re-employment in any branch or instrumentality of the government, including any government-owned or controlled corporations.

SO ORDERED.

Gesmundo, C.J., Leonen, S.A.J., Caguioa, Hernando, Lazaro-Javier, Inting, Zalameda, Gaerlan, J. Lopez, Dimaampao, and Villanueva, JJ., concur.

Rosario,[*] J., on leave.

Marquez,** J., no part.

Kho, Jr.[*] and Singh,[*] JJ., on leave.

[*] On leave.

** No part.

[1] Rollo, p. 6.

[2] Id.

[3] Id. at 7.

[4] Id. at 10-12.

[5] Id. at 10.

[6] Id. at 11.

[7] Id.

[8] Id. at 11-12.

[9] Id. at 12.

[10] Id.

[11] Id. at 2-5.

[12] Id. at 95-98.

[13] Id. at 141-143.

[14] Id. at 144.

[15] Id. at 152.

[16] Id. at 356-378. The Report and Recommendation was penned by Executive Judge Romeo D. Tagra.

[17] Id. at 378.

[18] Id. at 361-362.

[19] Id. at 362-363.

[20] Id.

[21] Id. at 370.

[22] Id. at 376.

[23] Id. at 380-398. The Memorandum was penned by General Counsel Romulo A. Paras, Jr.

[24] Id. at 398.

[25] Id. at 409-417.

[26] Id. at 410-416.

[27] Id. at 416.

[28] Id. at 418-434. The April 22, 2024 Report and Recommendation was penned by Acting Executive Director Eduardo C. Tolentino.

[29] Id. at 433-434.

[30] Id. at 425.

[31] Id. at 426-428.

[32] Id. at 433.

[33] SECTION 1. Transitory Clause. — The Code shall be applied to all pending and future cases, except to the extent that in the opinion of the Supreme Court, its retroactive application would not be feasible or would work injustice, in which case the procedure under which the cases were filed shall govern.

[34] Reyes v. Atty. Nieva, 794 Phil. 60, 379 (2016) [Per J. Perlas-Bernabe, En Banc].

[35] Rollo, pp. 426-427.

[36] Id. at 427.

[37] Id. at 423.

[38] Id. at 427-428.

[39] 884 Phil. 18 (2020) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[40] Id. at 28-29.

[41] 207 Phil. 76 (1983) [Per J. Makasiar, Second Division].

[42] Id. at 84. (Citation omitted)

[43] See Ambrosio v. Delas Armas, 869 Phil. 562, 572 (2020) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[44] Atty. Francisco v. Galvez, 622 Phil 25, 32 (2009) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[45] Judge Santiago-Avila v. Narisma, Jr., 934 Phil. 984, 993 (2023) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[46] 2025 CODE OF CONDUCT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR COURT OFFICIALS AND PERSONNEL, Canon V, sec. 24.

[47] See Rodil v. Posadas, 909 Phil. 120, 134 (2021) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

[48] Ambrosio v. Delas Armas, 869 Phil. 562, 573 (2020) [Per Curiam, En Banc].

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