PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. SPS. ISIDRO DULAY AND ELENA DULAY, ACCUSED-APPELLANTS.

Ponente: VILLON, J.

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VILLON, J.:

Before Us is the appeal[1] interposed by accused-appellants spouses Isidro Dulay and Elena Dulay from the decision[2]dated September 14, 2010 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Agoo, La Union, Branch 32,[3] finding them guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Estafa under Article 315, paragraph 2(a) of the Revised Penal Code (RPC).

The Information dated August 6, 2004 reads:

> "That sometime in the month of February 1999 and sometime subsequent thereto, in the Municipality of Agoo, Province of La Union, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, conspiring, confederating and mutually aiding each other, with intent to defraud, and by means of false pretenses and fraudulent acts which they made to spouses Isabelo L. Dulos and Hilaria C. Dulos, prior to or simultaneously with the commission of the fraud, to the effect that they are the owners of a parcel of land in Baguio City when in truth and in fact they are not, succeed in inducing the said spouses to deliver to them the aggregate sum of SEVEN HUNDRED SEVEN THOUSAND PESOS (P707,000.00) as partial or advance payment for the aforesaid parcel of land, and then once in possession of the said sum of money did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously convert and misappropriate the said sum of money to their own personal use and benefit, and then despite demands, fail or refuse and continue to fail or refuse to return the sum of P707,000.00 they took from spouses Isabelo L. Dulos and Hilaria C. Dulos, to the damage and prejudice of the said spouses in the said amount and other consequential damages.
>
> "CONTRARY TO LAW."[4]

Upon arraignment on September 3, 2007, appellants pleaded "Not Guilty"[5] to the offense charged. On September 11, 2007, the pre-trial of this case was terminated,[6] hence, trial on the merits ensued.

The relevant facts of the case, as established by the evidence on record, are as follows:

Marilou Dulos (or "Marilou") met appellant Elena Dulay (or "Elena") sometime in January 1999 at Agoo Public Market. Elena offered to sell a parcel of land (or "subject lot") located in Baguio City. Marilou then told Elena that her parents-in-law, spouses Isabelo L. Dulos (or "Isabelo") and Hilaria C. Dulos (or "Hilaria"), were looking for a lot to buy in the said City.

Marilou introduced Elena to her mother-in-law, Hilaria, who eventually agreed to purchase subject lot. During their second meeting, Elena was accompanied by her husband, Isidro Dulay (or "Isidro"). They talked about the price of subject lot but Hilaria wanted to first personally see, before buying the property. Thus, they all went to Baguio City to inspect subject lot and, thereafter, the spouses Dulos agreed to purchase the same for Nine Hundred Thousand Pesos (P900,000.00), giving a down payment of P150,000.00 and to pay the remaining balance at P30,000.00 per month, within a period of two (2) years. The parties further agreed that upon payment

of one half of the purchase price, the spouses Dulay shall hand over the title to subject lot to spouses Dulos.

Spouses Dulos then paid the amount of P150,000.00 and the monthly amortization of P30,000.00 starting May 1999. The total amount that the spouses Dulos paid was P707,000.00. However, the spouses Dulay never surrendered the title to subject lot as previously agreed upon. The spouses Dulos then went to the Register of Deeds of Baguio City where they found out that the lot they bought was not owned by spouses Dulay and there was nothing on record to show that the transfer of ownership over the same, in favor of the former, was being processed. They further found out that an affidavit was executed by one Carmencita Montes, stating that she is the daughter of spouses Isidro and Virginia Dulay, the real owners of subject lot and that they were already deceased.

As a consequence of what spouses Dulos learned regarding the status of subject lot, they did not pay the remaining balance of the purchase price thereof. When they confronted the spouses Dulay, the latter insisted that they were the real owners of subject lot and since the owner's duplicate copy of the title was lost, they were still working on its restitution. The spouses Dulay explained further that the registered owners, written in the tax declaration and photocopy of the covering TCT-T-2315 as the spouses Isidro Dulay and Virginia Dulay, were them, claiming that Elena and Virginia Dulay refer to one and the same person. Not convinced by the explanation, the spouses Dulos demanded for the return of their money which the spouses Dulay refused. Thus, the spouses Dulos were constrained to file a case for estafa against the spouses Dulay.[7]

Professing innocence, the spouses Dulay, denied that they deceived the spouses Dulos. They admitted that a sale transaction over subject lot took place between them. In fact, they did not deny that they received the total amount of P707,000.00 as partial payment on the price of subject lot. They claimed, however, that the spouses Dulos were fully aware of the status of the lot's title; and that a restitution of the lost owner's duplicate copy was necessary in order to transfer ownership thereof to the latter.[8]

After weighing the evidence presented, the court a quo rendered a decision, disposing as follows:

> “WHEREFORE, the foregoing considered, accused Isidro Dulay and Elena Dulay are hereby found guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of estafa by means of false pretenses and fraudulent representations and are sentenced to suffer an indeterminate penalty of four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional as minimum to twenty (20) years of reclusion temporal as maximum.
>
> “Further, the accused are ordered to pay the spouses Isabelo Dulos and Hilaria Dulos the amount of Seven Hundred Seven Thousand Pesos (P707,000.00) as actual damages.
>
> “SO ORDERED.”[9]

Hence, the instant appeal anchored on the lone assignment of error, to wit:

> THE REGIONAL TRIAL COURT ERRED IN CONVICTING APPELLANTS OF THE CRIME OF ESTAFA DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE PROSECUTION FAILED TO PROVE DECEIT ON THE PART OF THE APPELLANTS WHICH IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF THE CRIME OF ESTAFA UNDER ART. 315 2(PAR. A)[10]

Appellants firmly deny any criminal liability for estafa, arguing that the element of deceit is not present in the case at bar.

We do not agree.

Swindling or estafa by means of false pretenses or fraudulent acts executed prior to or simultaneously with the commission of the fraud is committed “by using fictitious name, or falsely pretending to possess power, influence, qualifications, property, credit, agency, business or imaginary transactions, or by other similar

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deceits."[11]

The elements of the crime of estafa under Article 315 paragraph 2(a) of the RPC, are as follows: (1) there must be a false pretense, fraudulent act or fraudulent means; (2) such false pretense, fraudulent act or fraudulent means must have been made or executed prior to or simultaneously with the commission of the fraud; (3) the offended party must have relied on the false pretense, fraudulent act or fraudulent means and was thus induced to part with his or her money or property; and (4) as a result, the offended party suffered damage.[12]

In this case, appellants falsely pretended that they were the owners of subject lot, which they offered to sell to spouses Dulos. This false representation constitutes fraud. It is clear from the testimonies of spouses Dulos that they parted with their money because they were made to believe that appellants were the real owners of the property when in truth, they were not. As a consequence of the said false representation, spouses Dulos suffered an actual damage in the amount of P707,000.00.

As aptly discussed by the Solicitor General, the prosecution has proved the element of deceit to warrant appellants' conviction. In fact, appellants were inconsistent with their theories and could not make up their mind as to what defenses to interpose. Initially, they claimed that the owner's copy of the title was lost and they were still in the process of reconstituting the same. Then they continued to receive money from the spouses Dulos. However, during trial, in their attempt to exculpate themselves from culpability, appellants asserted that the donation of subject lot in favor of spouses Isidro G. Dulay and Virginia Dulay, its registered owners, was null and void, though it appears that the property was transferred to the latter not by way of donation but by sale.

Notably, there were false pretenses made by appellants prior to or simultaneous with the commission of the fraud; they misrepresented that they were the registered owners, as appearing on the title. Apparently, appellants took advantage of the fact that the title (TCT No. T-2315) over subject lot was registered in the name of Isidro's uncle Isidro G. Dulay who was his namesake, then falsely claimed that Virginia Dulay and herein appellant Elena Dulay refer to one and the same person.[13]

Fraud, in its general sense, is deemed to comprise anything calculated to deceive, including all acts, omissions and concealment involving a breach of legal or equitable duty, trust or confidence justly reposed, resulting in damage to another, or by which an undue and unconscientious advantage is taken of another. It is a generic term embracing all multifarious means which human ingenuity can device, and which are resorted to by one individual to secure an advantage over another by false suggestions or by suppression of truth and includes all surprise, trick, cunning, dissembling and any unfair way by which another is cheated. Deceit is a species of fraud.[14]

Verily, fraud refers to all kinds of deception -- whether through insidious machination, manipulation, concealment or misrepresentation -- that would lead an ordinarily prudent person into error after taking the circumstances into account.[15] The deceit employed must be serious. It must be sufficient to impress or lead an ordinarily prudent person into error, taking into account the circumstances of each case.

The following testimony of Hilaria proves that appellants employed deceit, to wit:

"Q: Madam Witness, do you know a person by the name of Elena Dulay?

A: Yes.

Q: When did you first meet this person?

A: January 1999, maam.

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Q: Where madam witness?

A: In our house, maam.

Q: Where is your house located madam witness?

A: San Nicolas Central, Agoo, La Union, maam.

Q: What was her reason in going to your house?

A: The reason in going to my house is she wanted to sell a lot in Baguio City.

Q: Who was the companion if there was any of Elena Dulay when she went to your house?

A: Her daughter.

Q: And you said that was the first time that you met her?

A: Yes.

Q: How did she come to know your house?

A: She was introduced by my daughter-in-law that Elena Dulay is going to sell a lot I am also interested to buy.

Q: Who owns that lot that Elena Dulay is selling to you?

A: She said that they are the owners of the lot with Isidro Dulay.

Q: And that lot is located in Baguio City?

A: Yes.

Q: What happened after that first meeting with Elena Dulay in your house?

A: I told them to come back.

Q: Did she come back?

A: Yes, maam.

Q: Who was her companion when she came back to your house?

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A: It was Isidro Dulay, the husband of Elena.

Q: And when Elena Dulay came with Isidro Dulay to your house what did you talk about?

A: We talked about the price of the land that she is going to sell.

Q: Were you able to see that lot being offered for sale to you by the spouses Isidro Dulay and Elena Dulay?

A: I told them that we are going to Baguio City to see the lot.

Q: Did you go to Baguio City to see that lot?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you actually see that lot?

A: Yes.

Q: Who accompanied you to the lot in Baguio City?

A: My husband Isabelo Dulos and my son Dennis Dulos.

Q: Who showed you the lot?

A: It was Elena and Isidro Dulay.

Q: Where is that lot that is located in Baguio City that is being claimed by Isidro Dulay and Elena Dulay which they are offering to you for sale?

A: It is located at Avelino Street, Barangay San Andres Bonifacio, Baguio City.

Q: How big was that lot?

A: 450 square meters.

Q: And so, did you like the lot that was showed to you?

A: I like it but I have to talk to my husband first.

Q: Did you talk with your husband?

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A: Yes.

Q: And what was your agreement with your husband?

A: That they give us time and if the amount of the lot is not more than one million.

Q: So if they are going to sell the lot in a price not more than one million, you will buy it?

A: Yes, maam.

Q: Did you eventually agree on the price of that 450 square meters lot in Baguio City, did you agree, did you come up to an agreement with that price?

A: Well, if the price is too high and I don't have cash money to buy the lot if it is one million.

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Q: What was your counter-offer if any?

A: I said, if you like I will buy it for nine hundred thousand.

Q: And did they agree?

A: Yes.

Q: What were the terms of payment that you agreed upon?

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A: I will buy that lot by installment.

Q: So, you offered to buy the lot in installment, did they agree?

A: Yes.

Q: If it is by installment, how long a period will the installment payment take place?

A: I will give one hundred fifty thousand pesos down payment and the rest will be covered for two years.

Q: So, your first down payment is P150,000.00 and the rest in two years time?

A: Yes.

Q: What is the total price of the contract?

A: Nine hundred thousand maam.

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Q: Who went there to get your payment of P150,000.00?

A: It was Isidro Dulay and Elena Dulay and Dr. Prospera Garcia.

Q: Who is this Dr. Prospera Garcia?

A: Prospera Garcia was the sister of Isidro Dulay, maam.

Q: What was the participation if any and why was she there?

A: Dra. Prospera Garcia was a witness.

Q: When you handed the money?

A: Yes, maam.

Q: What else if any, what was the participation of Dra. Prospera Garcia?

A: She told us that Isidro and Elena are the owners of the lot in Baguio City.

Q: So when Dra. Prospera Garcia confirmed and affirmed that Isidro and Elena Dulay are the owners of the lot at Baguio City, what was the effect of that declaration to you if any?

A: It is good that she told us that the owners of the lot is Isidro Dulay and she is a doctor and I believed her.

Q: When the spouses Isidro and Elena Dulay went to your house to sell a property, were you told by them that the property in Baguio was owned by them?

A: Yes, maam.

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Q: Were you shown any document to prove that they were the owners of the property?

A: They gave us the xerox copy, maam.

Q: What xerox copy?

A: Xerox copy of the title of the lot in Baguio City maam.

Q: Based on the xerox copy that was shown to you, who are the registered owners?

A: It was Isidro Dulay and Virginia Dulay maam.

Q: The registered person Isidro Dulay, was he the same person who transacted to you?

A: Yes, maam.

Q: You said that they showed to you the xerox copy of the title. Did you ask the original of the title because they only showed to you a xerox copy?

A: I ask them but they are going to give the title after paying the one-half of the price of the lot.

COURT:

Q: Madam Witness, did you go to the Register of Deeds to check the veracity of the xerox copy of the TCT that was shown to you by the spouses Isidro and Elena Dulay?

A: Yes, your Honor, but they said that the title was lost so they are processing the title your Honor.

Q: Who told you that the title was lost?

A: It was Elena and Isidro maam.

Q: So you did not go to the Register of Deeds of Baguio?

A: No maam. I sent my daughter-in-law.

Q: What was the result or what did your daughter-in-law tell you?

A: She told me that the title of the lot was lost so she went to the Register of Deeds to see if it was lost or not but in fact the title of the lot was handed by Carmencita Montes, the daughter of Isidro Dulay, maam.

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Q: Did your daughter-in-law talk with the Register of Deeds from Baguio City?

A: Yes, your Honor.

Q: So it was the officers of the Register of Deeds or the employee of the Register of Deeds who told her that the original title on file on the said office has already been lost?

A: Yes, your Honor.

Q: Did you ask spouses Isidro and Elena the owner's duplicate copy of the title?

A: I asked them, they said it was lost so they are processing the title, your Honor.

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ATTY. ARCHOG:

Q: The registered owner in the xerox copy that they showed you appears to be Isidro Dulay and Virginia Dulay. You said that it was Elena who first came to sell to you the property?

A: Yes, maam.

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COURT:

Q: Did you ask Elena Dulay about this Virginia?

A: She said the same person Virginia Dulay and Elena.

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ATTY. ARCHOG:

Q: Was this original copy of the title delivered to you when you paid one-half of the price?

A: No, maam.

Q: Why was it not delivered to you?

A: Because they are still processing.

Q: That is what they claim?

A: Yes.

Q: How much all in all did you pay of the P900,000.00 that you agreed as per agreed payment?

A: P701,000.00.

Q: You reached paying P700,000.00 and when you reached paying P700,000.00, was the original title delivered to you?

A: Nothing, maam.

Q: You said earlier when asked by the Honorable Court that you sent your daughter-in-law to verify from the Register of Deeds of Baguio City?

A: Yes, maam.

Q: And she found out that the owner's copy is in the possession of one Carmencita Montes?

A: Yes, maam.

Q: My question is, who is this Carmencita Montes?

A: Carmencita Montes is the daughter of Isidro Dulay.

Q: Who is this Isidro Dulay who is the father of Carmencita Montes? Is Isidro Dulay the same person as the accused in this case?

A: No, they are different.

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Q: If you know, are they related?

A: Relatives of Isidro Dulay.

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Q: Madam Witness, this Isidro Dulay who is the registered owner in the title whom you claimed to be the father of Carmencita Montes, who is this person in relation to the Isidro Dulay who transacted with you on the sale of that property?

A: They are only relatives, maam.

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COURT:

Q: After paying P701,000.00, what happened next?

A: After paying P701,000.00, we did not continue anymore because they did not give us the title of the lot your Honor."[16]

From the aforementioned testimony of Hilaria, it is clear that appellants deceived her and her spouse Isabelo by falsely pretending to be the real owners of subject lot who had all the right to dispose of the same.

She testified in a candid and straightforward manner without any hesitation and nothing in the record would indicate that she harbored ill-motives against appellants as to falsely testify against them before the court a quo. Hence, We find no reason to deviate from its findings that the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses, especially that of Hilaria, are credible to prove that appellants committed the crime of estafa through deceit.

In fine, We agree with the ruling of the court a quo that all the elements of estafa by means of deceit are present in the instant case, thus:

> "In the case here obtaining, it cannot be denied that the accused-spouses Isidro and Elena Dulay presented themselves as the owners of the lot subject of this case, albeit with the explanation that there was apparent mistake in the name written in TCT No. T-2315. On direct examination, accused Isidro Dulay testified,[17] thus:
>
> DIRECT EXAMINATION BY ATTY. MANOLITO HIDALGO:
>
> Q: Mr. Witness, you said a while ago that being an adopted son of Maria Dulay she will give a land in Baguio City, Where is the land located?
>
> A: Yes sir, but it was declared in the name of Isidro Dulay, the husband of Virginia Dulay.
>
> "To further justify their alleged ownership over the property, the accused repeatedly gave assurances to the spouses Dulos that they will process the transferring of their names in the certificate of title. These representations made by the accused, would very well be the reason why the spouses Dulos parted with a

considerable sum of money in the hope that everything will be remedied. Relying on the false pretenses of the accused, the spouses Dulos fell prey to the grand design concocted by the accused. From the very beginning, the accused already wittingly knew that the land they offered for sale was not theirs. Yet, in dealing with the spouses Dulos, they continuously gave the impression that there was but a simple mistake in the name indicated in the certificate of title and that a mere transfer of their names in the certificate of title can readily be processed. When asked by the Court, accused Isidro Dulay stressed, thus:[18]

COURT QUESTION:

Q:

And, how are you going to transfer that property donated by your mother to your name?

A:

Because my mother told me that she has a property at Baguio City that she donated to Isidro and Virginia Dulay, and she told me that she wanted that property to get back and give it to me.

“Likewise, accused Elena Dulay testified in this wise:[19]

COURT QUESTION:

Q:

So, how did you offer the property to the Duloses?

A:

We have a lot for sale in Baguio City but it is in the name of Virginia and Isidro which was mistakenly registered by Maria in the name of Isidro and Virginia Dulay.

Q:

So, it is now your claim Madam Witness that you did not own the property in Baguio but Isidro and Virginia?

A:

Yes, your Honor.

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Q:

Listen to me Madam Witness, you testified a while ago that when you offered the property to the Duloses, you said 'my husband has a property in Baguio however it was mistakenly registered in the name of Isidro and Virginia Dulay.'

A:

Yes, your Honor,

Q:

You did not state in this document that the property was registered in the name of Isidro and Virginia Dulay?

A:

No, your Honor.

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> "Clearly, the spouses Dulos relied heavily on the representations made by the accused that they are the owners of the subject property. Their persistent assurances that they will be able to effect the transfer of their name in the title as well as their act of not stating in the receipt that the property was registered in the name of Isidro and Virginia Dulay, speaks of their deceitful intent to commit fraud. In a plethora of cases, the Supreme Court has defined deceit as a false representation of a matter of fact whether in words or conduct, by false or misleading allegations, or by concealment of that which should have been disclosed which deceives or is intended to deceive another."[20]

Well-settled is the rule that the findings of fact of the trial court as well as its calibration of the evidence of the parties, its assessment of the credibility and probative weight of testimonies of the witnesses, and its conclusion based on its findings are accorded by the appellate court high respect, if not conclusive effect.[21] Unless the factual findings complained of are not supported by the evidence on record or the assailed judgment is based on a misapprehension of facts, the findings of the trial court must be accorded the highest respect, even finality, by the Supreme Court.[22]

Finding no reversible error committed by the court a quo, the denial of the instant appeal is inevitable. The appealed decision, however, should be modified in that appellants are further held liable for interest of 6% per annum on the awarded civil damages.[23]

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant appeal is hereby DENIED. The assailed Decision dated September 14, 2010 of the RTC of Agoo, La Union, Branch 32 is hereby AFFIRMED with MODIFICATION in that appellants are further ordered to pay interest of 6% per annum on the awarded actual damages, reckoned from the finality of this decision until full payment thereof.

The aforesaid Decision is hereby affirmed in all other respects.

SO ORDERED.

Macalino, and * Inting, JJ., concur.

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*Vice Justice P.B. Corales per Office Order No. 161-14-AGT dated April 24, 2014.

[1] Records, pp. 35-58

[2] Records, pp. 350-359

[3] Hon.Jennifer A. Pilar, Presiding Judge.

[4] Records, p. 1

[5] Records, p. 90

[6] Records, pp. 95-96

[7] TSN, March 24, 2008, pp. 2-23; TSN, May 22, 2008, pp. 3-7 (Marilou Dulos); TSN, February 24, 2009, pp. 3-23 (Hilaria Dulos)

[8] TSN, September 22, 2009, pp. 24-27; TSN, October 8, 2009, pp. 6-17 (Isidro Dulay); TSN, February 23, 2010, pp. 3-25 (Elena Dulay)

[9] Records, pp. 358-359

[10] Rollo, p. 43, Appellants'Brief, p. 4

[11] Art. 315, par. 2(a), Revised Penal Code

[12] Franco v. People, G.R. No. 171328, 16 February 2011, 643 SCRA 474, 487 citing RCL Feeders PTE., Ltd. v. Hon. Perez, 487 Phil. 211, 220-221 (2004).

[13] Rollo, p. 7

[14] People vs. Hernando, 317 SCRA 617

[15] Solidbank Corporation v. Mindanao Ferroalloy Corporation, G.R. No. 153535, July 28, 2005, 464 SCRA 409, 425.

[16] TSN, February 24, 2009, pp. 3-19

[17] TSN, September 22, 2009, p. 11

[18] TSN, October 8, 2009, p. 7

[19] TSN, February 23, 2010, pp. 28-30

[20] Records, pp. 356-358

[21] Manangan vs. Court of Appeals, 425 SCRA 169

[22] Benguet Exploration, Inc. vs. Court of Appeals, 351 SCRA 445

[23] People vs. Sabadlab, G.R. No. 175924 dated March 14, 2012

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