SPOUSES PRESCILO AND GOMERSINDA TAGALOGUIN, COMPLAINANTS, VS. CONRADO V. HINGCO JR., DEPUTY SHERIFF IV, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT (BRANCH 7), TUBOD, LANAO DEL NORTE, RESPONDENT.

A.M. NO. P-05-2008. June 21, 2005

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

As court employees, sheriffs are obliged to conduct themselves with propriety and decorum and to ensure that their actions are above suspicion at all times. The Court cannot countenance -- it in fact condemns -- any conduct, act or omission that violates the norm of public accountability and diminishes, or even just tends to diminish, the faith of the people in the judiciary.

The Case and the Facts

This case originated from a Complaint[1] filed with the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) on July 9, 1999, by Spouses Prescilo and Gomersinda Tagaloguin against Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco Jr. In their Complaint, the spouses charged respondent with gross misconduct as follows:

> "x x x x x x x x x
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> "3. That one Asuncion Alvia, sometimes (sic) on January 29, 1993, filed Civil Case No. 658 for Forcible Entry and Damages with Prayers for Preliminary Mandatory Injunction and Restraining Order against the herein plaintiffs, spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin, before the Honorable 7th Municipal Circuit [Trial] Court of Tubod-Baroy, Baroy, Lanao del Norte;
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> "4. That the subject matter of said Civil Case No. 658 was allegedly a parcel of land known as Lot 6, containing an area of THIRTY NINE THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED TWENTY SIX (39,726) SQUARE METERS, located at Pangi, Baroy, Lanao del Norte, and which was allegedly entered by the defendants in said case, the spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin now plaintiffs in the present administrative case;
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> "5. That the Honorable 7[th] Municipal Circuit Trial Court of Tubod, Baroy, Lanao del Norte, on August 9, 1993, rendered a decision in said Civil Case No. 658 in favor of defendants in said case spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin, now the plaintiffs in the present administrative case; x x x
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> "6. That Asuncion Alvia, plaintiff in said Civil Case No. 658 appealed the said decision dated August 9, 1993, to the Honorable Regional Trial Court of Lanao del Norte, but was remanded back to the Municipal Circuit [Trial] Court of Baroy, Tubod, Baroy, Lanao del Norte, for further proceedings and again decided for the second time in a decision dated February 14, 1996, again in favor of the defendants in said case and who are now plaintiffs in the present administrative case the spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin; x x x

> "7. That again plaintiff Asuncion Alvia in said case appealed the said decision dated February 14, 1996, to the Honorable Regional Trial Court, Branch 07, Tubod, Lanao del Norte;
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> "8. That however after winning the case in Civil Case No. 658 in two (2) decisions the spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin, the plaintiffs in the present administrative case and as defendants in said Civil Case No. 658, lost before the Honorable Regional Trial Court, Branch 07, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, on the appeal of the said Asuncion Alvia in a decision dated February 14, 1997; x x x
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> "9. That the herein plaintiffs spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin thru their counsel at the time filed a Motion for Reconsideration of the Decision dated February 14, 1997, which was however denied by the Honorable Regional Trial Court, Branch 07, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, in an order dated March 25, 1997, consequently, the spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin, plaintiffs in the present case went to the Supreme Court on Certiorari which was also denied by virtue of a [R]esolution dated June 25, 1997;
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> "10. That in the meanwhile a Writ of Execution pending appeal was issued by the Honorable Regional Trial Court, Branch 07, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, in an order dated March 25, 1997, and the Writ of Execution in accordance thereto was actually issued on April 9, 1997;
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> "11. That in the said [D]ecision dated February 14, 1997, the dispositive portion read[s] as follows, quote:
> '1. Ordering the defendants to pay the plaintiff the amount of P50,000.00 and to pay the cost of the proceedings;
>
> '2. Ordering the defendants to restore the plaintiff in her possession over the subject property and ordering and restraining the defendants from continuing any further acts herein complained of.'

"12. That to satisfy the judgment sum of FIFTY THOUSAND (P50,000.00) PESOS, in accordance with the said decision dated February 14, 1997, defendant Sheriff IV, Conrado V. Hingco, Jr. of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 07, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, levied on execution a parcel of land owned by the spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin at Mananao, Baroy, Lanao del Norte, containing an area of TWENTY ONE THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED SIXTY (21,660) Square Meters more or less, known as Lot 952-B covered by Original Certificate of Title No. P-5, 146 of the Registry of Deeds of Lanao del Norte; x x x

"13. That on August 7, 1997, in accordance with the Writ of Execution issued on April 8, 1997, Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., defendant herein accompanied by escorts, consisting of Policemen of Baroy, Lanao del Norte, a daughter of Asuncion Alvia and a Barangay Councilor of Pangi, Baroy, Lanao del Norte and hired workers went to Pangi, Baroy, Lanao del Norte to enforce the decision dated February 14, 1997;

"14. That however, in the execution and enforcement of the said decision dated February 14, 1997, and in accordance with the Writ of Execution issued on April 8, 1997, defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr. of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 07, Tubod, Lanao del Norte and in cahoot[s] and with the knowledge and consent of Asuncion Alvia and in utter and gross negligence and utter recklessness and in utmost bad faith and with the precise intent of violating the rights of the herein plaintiffs Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin did not enforce the decision as well as the writ in accordance with the tenor of the writ and what is to be executed, because Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., in collaboration with said Asuncion Alvia entered a wrong property not subject of the decision as well as that of the writ of execution, because what is executed by defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., is Lot No. 7, owned by plaintiffs Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin and not Lot No. 6 which was the subject of the decision as well as the Writ of Execution and worst Sh[e]riff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., and in conspiracy and confederacy with Asuncion Alvia, demolished and destroyed the residential house of the plaintiffs erected on Lot No. 7 as well as the common house to the great damage and prejudice of the plaintiffs;

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"15. That the said demolition and destruction of the residential house of plaintiffs Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin upon the order and in conspiracy and confederacy of both defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr. and Asuncion Alvia was not only illegal and unlawful and contrary to law and on account of the wanton and utter negligence and recklessness of said defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., but worst the same was made in utter violation of the rules as there was no motion for the demolition of the residential house of the plaintiffs neither [was there] an order as a result of the motion to that effect for the demolition of the house of the plaintiffs as well as the common house erected on said Lot No. 7 which is not the subject of the decision dated February 14, 1997, neither that of the writ of execution dated April 8, 1998;

"16. That as a result of the said wanton and utter recklessness committed by herein defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., in the performance of his duties aside from the fact that said demolition and destruction of plaintiffs house as well as that of the common house erected on Lot No. 7, being illegal and unlawful and contrary to law and contrary to the rules, in cahoot[s] with said Asuncion Alvia and in exceeding the authority and tenor of the said [D]ecision as well as the [W]rit of [E]xecution issued, in executing a property not included by the said decision as well as the [W]rit of [E]xecution plaintiffs spouses Gomersinda A. Tagaloguin and Prescilo Tagaloguin lost important belongings and personal properties and valuable listed as follows;

x x x x x x x x x

"These items that were lost were valued at no less than FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND (P500,000.00) PESOS;

"17. That the residential house is valued at no less than TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND (P200,000.00) PESOS;

"18. That as a result of the said utter and wanton negligence and recklessness and in gross violation of law and of the rules and with intent and in utmost bad faith to tr[a]mple and trifle the rights of the herein plaintiffs in enforcing the said decision of the [W]rit of [E]xecution without therefore exercising due diligence as mandated by law in the performance of his duties committed by said defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., plaintiffs herein had suffered tremendous mental anguish, serious anxiety, and sleepless nights and had deeply been humiliated which would entitle them to no less than ONE HUNDRED FIFTY THOUSAND (P150,000.00) PESOS moral damages;

"19. That in order to deter others working in government from committing and doing similar acts defendant Sheriff IV Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., must be condemned to pay exemplary damages at no less than FIFTY THOUSAND (P50,000.00) PESOS;

"20. That plaintiffs most likely would be constrained to secure the services of counsel and most likely at a contract price of FIFTY THOUSAND (P50,000.00) PESOS, Attorney's fees, and would likely to incur no less than TWENTY FIVE [THOUSAND] (P25,000.00) PESOS, future litigation expenses."[2]

On September 16, 1999, then Court Administrator Alfredo L. Benipayo referred the Complaint to respondent sheriff and required the latter to comment thereon within ten days from receipt of the notice.[3] Respondent failed to comply within the required period. In a letter[4] dated April 16, 2001, then acting Court Administrator Zenaida N. Elepaño directed him to file the required comment within a non-extendible period of five (5) days from receipt of the notice. He was further warned that failure to do so would constrain the OCA to submit the case for consideration of the Court, even without his comment.

On June 19, 2001, the OCA received the May 30, 2001 Counter-Affidavit, in which respondent alleged as follows:

"x x x x x x x x x

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> "3. That sometimes [sic] on April 8, 1997, Acting Clerk of Court Vileo R. Ocampos, issued a Writ of Execution in Civil Case No. 07-368, directing Sheriff Conrado V. Hingco, Jr., to enforced the [D]ecision of Judge Oscar E. Zerna dated March 25, 1997; x x x
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> "4. That after April 8, 1997, the respondent Sheriff enforced the Writ of Execution to Placed in Possession, the plaintiff appellant ASUNCION ALVIA to the subject land which is Lot No. 6, situated at Pang[i], Baroy, Lanao del Norte, NOT Lot No. 7 which was alleged in their complaint in paragraph 14 of their Administrative complaint;
>
> "5. That the alleged [d]emolition of the residential house erected on Lot No. 7, at Pang[i], Baroy, Lanao del Norte, x x x actually happened on August 7, 1997, and it was Mr. SANTOS AMPARADO, the Appointed Administrator of the Estate of ANTONIO AMPARADO, together with his hired personnel and laborers who actually did the demolition of the residential house erected on said [L]ot No. 7. And this alleged complaint x x x was the same complaint filed in our Court RTC-Branch 7, Tubod, Lanao del Norte, entitled: GOMER[SI]NDA TAGALOGUIN rep. by EFREN A. TAGALOGUIN versus x x x ASUNCION ALVIA and SHERIFF CONRADO V. HINGCO, JR., docketed as CIVIL CASE NO. 07-4[5]5, and this [was] already answered by our counsel; x x x
>
> "6. That the presence of respondent Sheriff Conrado Hingco, Jr., on said [d]ate August 7, 1997, was in accordance with the Order of the Hon. Judge Oscar E. Zerna, dated April 24, 1997 in an Sp. Proc. Case No. 07-110, entitled: IN THE MATTER OF PETITION FOR AN APPROVAL OF WILL [OF] ANTONIO AMPARADO, petitioner SANTOS [E]. AMPARADO; x x x
>
> "7. That being my responsibility and obligation as such SHERIFF, I personally assisted Mr. Santos Amparado on that time in the performance of his duty as Administrator of the Estate of Antonio Amparado and that said Lot No. 7 is part of the real properties subject of the Administratorship of Mr. Santos Amparado;
>
> "x x x x x x x x x"[5]

In a Resolution dated February 20, 2002, the Court, acting upon the recommendation of the OCA, referred the case to the executive judge of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Tubod, Lanao del Norte, for investigation, report and recommendation within sixty (60) days from receipt of notice.[6]

While acting Executive Judge Moslemen T. Macarambon was conducting the investigation, the parties (including herein complainants) in Special Proceedings No. 07-110, Civil Case No. 07-455 and Criminal Case No. 07-972, before the same court, decided to compromise. The parties sought to put an end to all litigations they had filed against each other and thus regain harmony in their familial relations. In the criminal case, the private complainants executed an Affidavit of Desistance with Motion to Dismiss.[7]

Herein complainants and respondent, together with Amparado, entered into a Compromise Agreement,[8] in which they prayed for the dismissal of Special Proceedings No. 07-110, Civil Case No. 07-455, and the instant Administrative Case No. 001-07-2002. In this Agreement, they also waived and abandoned all their claims and counterclaims, including their prayer for attorney's fees and damages.[9]

Consequently, the court rendered two Decisions, both dated July 2, 2002, dismissing all these cases including the present administrative case, for having been rendered moot and academic by the aforementioned Compromise Agreement.

However, in a Resolution[10] dated March 31, 2003, this Court set aside the RTC's Decision dated July 2, 2002, insofar as the dismissal of the present administrative case was concerned. The Supreme Court reminded the acting executive judge that he had merely been directed to investigate and submit his findings and recommendations on the administrative Complaint, but that the authority to decide or resolve it had not been delegated to him.[11]

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Judge Macarambon was thus directed to submit his findings on the investigation that he had conducted.[12]

In his Report and Recommendation,[13] the investigating judge found that respondent had committed negligence by failing to render such degree of care and vigilance as was justified by the circumstances to protect the interests of herein complainants. According to these findings, respondent was present during the incident complained of, by virtue of an RTC Order directing him to assist Santos Amparado, the estate administrator appointed by the court. Although he informed Amparado that the latter's duty was to preserve the properties of the estate, the former did nothing to stop the demolition ordered by the latter. Respondent admitted that he had left the matter entirely in the hands of the administrator.

Nonetheless, the investigating judge opined that the negligence of respondent was simple, not gross, because the latter had relied on the apparent authority of the duly appointed estate administrator to demolish the house. The judge thus recommended that respondent be "fined P2,000 with a stern warning that a repetition of a similar act in the future will be dealt with more severely."[14]

Findings and Recommendation of the OCA

The Office of the Court Administrator notes the admission of respondent that despite his knowledge of the absence of a court order therefor, he did not dissuade Amparado from demolishing the property. The OCA opines that respondent effectively admitted his failure to discharge his duties and responsibilities with due care and diligence, in a manner to be expected from an officer of the court. He did not even see it fit to submit a report to the RTC, a duty that allegedly belonged to the estate administrator. Further claiming that the court had simply directed him to assist Amparado in exercising his duties as administrator, respondent insisted that the demolition was the act solely of Amparado.[15]

Respondent's lame excuse that the court Order did not include a directive to file a report was a mere attempt to conceal his incompetence and inefficiency. As provided in the Revised Manual[16] for Clerks of Court, the general functions and duties of sheriffs include the preparation and submission of returns or reports on all proceedings the court has assigned to them and all the processes they have executed.

The OCA explains that such processes embrace all orders of the court and, therefore, include the court Order directing respondent to assist the estate administrator in taking possession of the property. Filing the report would have bolstered the claim of respondent that he did not conspire with the administrator in the unauthorized demolition. But by passively allowing and tolerating the latter's unauthorized actions, respondent became a tool for the resulting prejudice and injustice suffered by the complainants .[17]

Thus, the OCA concludes that respondent is guilty of malicious nonfeasance and dereliction of duty. It recommends that the penalty of six-month suspension from office without pay be imposed on him for his "inefficiency and incompetence in the performance of official duties and inexcusable neglect of duty, conduct unbecoming a public officer, conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service and oppression."[18]

The Court's Ruling

We partly agree with the OCA.

Administrative Liability

Respondent attempts to shield himself from liability by asserting that the Order directing him to assist the estate administrator did not include any directive to render a report and an inventory of the items taken. He further asserts that it was Amparado alone, with the aid of hired laborers, who razed the subject premises.

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This defense offered by respondent is hollow and undeserving of merit. His duty to render a report and an inventory emanates from the Manual for Clerks of Court, which likewise enumerates the duties and functions of sheriffs. He is therefore presumed to know his official tasks and responsibilities.

In Pecson v. Sicat Jr.,[19] one of the respondent sheriffs was held administratively liable for failing to make a full inventory of all the pieces of property he had levied on and for going beyond the directives of the Writ of Execution he had been ordered to implement. A one-month suspension for gross inefficiency, incompetence and grave abuse of authority was meted out to him.

For not advising his co-respondent of the duty to make a complete inventory of the property levied upon, the other respondent sheriff, who had simply accompanied the former in enforcing the Writ, was found to have been remiss in the latter's duty as officer of the court. This other sheriff was fined P1,000 for neglect of duty and incompetence in the performance of his official duties.

Similarly, in Bernabe v. Eguia,[20] the Court held that the respondent sheriff's tardy submission of a return more than 60 days after receiving the Writ deserved reproof. Respondent was thus suspended for two (2) months without pay.

In Sy v. Norberte,[21] the erring sheriff allegedly gave the defendant a tip-off on the issuance of a writ of preliminary attachment that was to be executed against the latter and was, moreover, present when the defendant moved all her personal belongings out of her house. The penalty of one-month suspension was imposed on the sheriff, even though the alleged leakage of information had not been established with certainty. The Court ratiocinated that the sheriff's mere presence during the removal of the defendant's belongings was in itself reproachable, because such act could not have been for anything else but the circumvention of a valid court Order.[22] The Court stressed:

> "The nature and responsibilities of officers and men of the judiciary, repeated every so often, are neither mere rhetorical words nor idealistic sentiments but working standards and attainable goals that should be matched with actual deeds. Their conduct and behavior, from the presiding judge to the sheriffs and the lowliest personnel, should be characterized with the greatest of circumspection. Everyone is expected to serve with the highest degree of responsibility, integrity, loyalty and efficiency and to conduct themselves with propriety and decorum at all times."[23]

While Respondent Hingco was not physically involved in the actual demolition, he admits that he had prior knowledge of the impending demolition and was aware of its irregularity. Nonetheless, without giving even the slightest admonition, respondent irresponsibly allowed the estate administrator to tear down the premises that the latter ought to have preserved, to the grave prejudice of herein complainants.

Worse, the failure of respondent to inform the court of the unauthorized demolition blemishes his asseveration of good faith. Such failure was clearly a neglect of his official duty to report all incidents occurring while serving court orders.

Time and time again, this Court has reminded sheriffs that, as court employees, they must conduct themselves with propriety and decorum; their actions must be above suspicion at all times.[24] The Court cannot countenance -- it in fact condemns -- any conduct, act or omission that violates the norm of public accountability and diminishes, or even just tends to diminish, the faith of the people in the judiciary.[25]

This Court, in Añonuevo v. Pempeña,[26] enunciated:

> "x x x. This Court has emphasized, time and time again, that the conduct and behavior of everyone connected with an office charged with the dispensation of justice, from the presiding judge to the sheriff down to the

> lowliest clerk should be circumscribed with the heavy burden of responsibility. Their conduct, at all times, must be characterized with propriety and decorum, but above all else, must be above and beyond suspicion. For every employee of the judiciary should be an example of integrity, uprightness and honesty."[27]

In V. C. Ponce Co., Inc. v. Eduarte,[28] the Court held that sheriffs and deputy sheriffs may be properly dismissed, fined or suspended from office for acts that had been committed in violation of law, and that impeded a fair and efficient administration of justice. Sheriffs are court officers and agents of the law primarily responsible for the speedy and effective service of all court processes and writs. As such, they have an important role to play in the administration of justice, because they are called upon to serve court writs, execute all processes and implement court orders. Thus, they should discharge their duties and responsibilities faithfully, with due care and utmost diligence.[29]

Considering, however, that there is no clear and sufficient basis for finding that respondent was indeed in collusion with the estate administrator, and absent any showing of bad faith or ill motive in effecting the demolition, we find no basis for the OCA's finding that respondent is guilty of oppression as well. In the light of prevailing jurisprudence and the fact that this transgression appears to be his first, we also find that the OCA's recommended penalty of six (6) months of suspension without pay is too harsh.

WHEREFORE, Respondent Sheriff Conrado V. Hingco Jr. is found guilty of simple neglect of duty and incompetence in the performance of his official duties. He is hereby SUSPENDED for two (2) months without pay and STERNLY WARNED that a repetition of similar infractions will be dealt with more severely.

SO ORDERED.

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

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[1] Rollo, pp. 2-12.

[2] Complaint, pp. 1-8; rollo, pp. 2-9.

[3] 1[st] Indorsement dated September 16, 1999; rollo, p. 53.

[4] Rollo, p. 54.

[5] Counter-Affidavit, pp. 1-2; rollo, pp. 55-56.

[6] Resolution dated February 20, 2002; id., p. 85.

[7] Rollo, p. 126.

[8] Id., pp. 123-125.

[9] Compromise Agreement, p. 2; rollo, p. 24.

[10] Rollo, pp. 134-135.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Rollo, pp. 140-147.

[14] Report and Recommendation, p. 8; rollo, p. 147.

[15] OCA Memorandum dated November 5, 2003, p. 6; rollo, p. 243. Penned by Deputy Court Administrator Christopher O. Lock, with the approval of Court Administrator Presbitero J. Velasco Jr.

[16] Volume 1, p. 205.

[17] OCA Memorandum, pp. 7-8; rollo, pp. 244-245.

[18] Id., pp. 8 & 245.

[19] 298 SCRA 122, October 16, 1998.

[20] 411 SCRA 259, 268, September 18, 2003.

[21] 337 SCRA 1, August 1, 2000.

[22] Id., at p. 7.

[23] Id., pp. 6-7, per Vitug, J.

[24] Flores v. Caniya, 326 Phil. 532, April 26, 1996; Loyao Jr. v. Armecin, 337 SCRA 47, August 1, 2000; Llamado v. Ravelo, 280 SCRA 597, October 16, 1997.

[25] Mendoza v. Mabutas, 223 SCRA 411, June 17, 1993 (cited in Bernabe v. Eguia, supra).

[26] 234 SCRA 168, July 18, 1994 (citing Valenton v. Melgar, 219 SCRA 372, March 3, 1993.

[27] Id., p. 174, per Regalado, J.

[28] 343 SCRA 445, October 18, 2000 (cited in Bernabe v. Eguia, supra).

[29] Bernabe v. Eguia, supra.

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