

NATIONAL POWER CORPORATION, PETITIONER, VS. COURT OF APPEALS AND ALEJANDRO MAMOT, RESPONDENTS.

G.R. No. L-45664. January 29, 1993

Ponente: ROMERO, J.

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ROMERO, J.:

This is a petition for review on certiorari of the Decision of February 2, 1977 of the Court of Appeals affirming the Order of November 25, 1971 of the then Court of First Instance of Bulacan which denied the National Power Corporation's petition for the review of the decree of registration previously issued by the said lower court.

On August 21, 1968[1] private respondent Alejandro Mamot filed with the then Court of First Instance of Bulacan at Malolos,[2] an application for registration of title over six parcels of land or Lots Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 of Psu-162460-Amd. with a total area of 417,251 square meters situated in San Mateo, Norzagaray Bulacan (Land Registration Case No. N-2581-M). Copies of the application were thereafter duly published and posted in conspicuous places in the municipality. As no one opposed the application, on May 6, 1969, the court issued an order of general default.[3]

Mamot then submitted his evidence ex-parte before the Deputy Clerk of Court who had been so commissioned by the lower court. On June 23, 1969, the same court promulgated a decision confirming the order of general default and ordering the registration of the six parcels of land in favor of Mamot and the issuance of the corresponding decree of registration after the decision shall have become final.[4]

On the same date, however, one Pedro Sarmiento filed a motion praying that he be allowed to file an opposition to Mamot's application for registration of title.[5] Mamot moved to strike the motion from the records. Later, Sarmiento filed a motion to set aside the order of general default. Acting on these motions, the lower court issued the Order of September 23, 1969 granting Sarmiento ten days within which to file his written opposition.[6] In the meantime, however, Mamot and Sarmiento tried to settle amicably the dispute between them. Their effort resulted in the execution of a deed of sale involving Lot 4 in favor of Sarmiento. Accordingly, Sarmiento withdrew his opposition and moved that the Decision of June 23, 1969 be amended by adjudicating Lot 4 to him.[7]

Thus, on November 13, 1969, the lower court rendered an amended decision awarding Lots Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 to Mamot and Lot No. 4 to Sarmiento.[8]

Mamot having moved for the issuance of a decree of registration, on December 17, 1969, the lower court issued an "Order for the Issuance of Decree" directing the Commissioner of Land Registration "to comply with Section 41 of Act 496 as amended by Section 21 of Act 2347." [9] Thereafter, the Chief Surveyor and Chief of the Division of Original Registration, acting for the Commissioner, rendered a report stating that "the platting of said Lots 1 to 6 of Psu-162460-Amd., on our Municipal Index Map, shows that they are inside Proclamation No. 599 (National Power Corporation)." [10]

The lower court then summoned the National Power Corporation (NPC for brevity) to a hearing on the report.

Upon learning at the hearing that a decision had been rendered in favor of Mamot, on February 25, 1970, the NPC filed a petition for relief from judgment.[11] The NPC alleged therein that the hearing for the application for registration was conducted without proper notice having been given it; that Mamot committed fraud in failing to allege in his application that the lots he applied for are covered by Proclamation No. 599, that the Angat access road traversed the lots he applied for, and that NPC had rights and interests over the properties involved; that had Mamot not committed said fraudulent act, the court would have discovered that he had no lawful rights over the property; and that it had good and strong evidence to counteract Mamot's claim.

Alleging that the NPC had no personality to file a petition for relief from judgment because an order of general default had been issued in the case and that the decision of the lower court having become final and executory, what remained to be done was the ministerial act of the Land Registration Commissioner to issue the decree of registration, Mamot moved to strike out the petition for relief from judgment.[12]

However, finding merit in the said petition, the lower court granted the prayer for relief from judgment in its Order of March 17, 1970 which also lifted the general order of default and directed the NPC to file its opposition.[13] Consequently, the NPC filed its opposition, to the application for registration alleging that neither the applicant nor his predecessors-in-interest possessed sufficient title over the parcels of land involved as they had not acquired them either by composition title from the Spanish government or by possessory information title under the Royal Decree of February 13, 1894; that neither Mamot nor his predecessors-in-interest had been in open, continuous, exclusive and notorious possession and occupation of the land for at least thirty years immediately preceding the application, and that the parcels of land involved are within the Angat Reservation pursuant to Presidential Proclamation No. 599 and as such, they are under the administration of the NPC.[14] The Solicitor General, appearing for the Director of Lands, also filed an opposition to the application alleging basically the same grounds as the NPC.[15]

Mamot objected to these oppositions and moved for the reconsideration of the Order of March 17, 1970. Another claimant to the land, one Fabian Castillo, filed a motion to lift the general order of default.

On February 3, 1971, the lower court issued an order denying Castillo's motion and dismissing the petition for relief from judgment filed by the NPC.[16] The order is premised on the following:

"Movants Fabian Castillo, et al. may advance the argument that, at this stage, the judgment in this case is considered reopened because the Court granted the petition for relief from judgment of oppositor National Power Corporation. It appears, however, that the Court was not aware yet of any decree in the instant application when it granted the petition for relief of the National Power Corporation on March 17, 1970, for the decree in this case was issued by the Land Registration Commission on May 7, 1970. The petition for relief from judgment is, therefore, also no longer available at this stage. However, oppositor National Power Corporation may likewise resort to a petition for review which it can file within one year from the issuance of the decree on the ground of actual fraud."

Heeding the court's advice, the NPC filed a petition for the review of the decree of registration.[17] Dated May 7, 1971, the petition reiterated the NPC's allegations in its petition for relief from judgment charging Mamot with fraud. Mamot moved for the dismissal of the said petition.

On November 25, 1971, the lower court issued an Order denying NPC's petition for review of the decree of registration.[18] Pertinent portions of the two-page Order states:

"Assuming that applicant Alejandro C. Mamot failed to notify the National Power Corporation of the filing of his application for original registration of title to land, such failure or omission does not constitute actual fraud as contemplated under Act 496. Besides, it cannot be claimed by the National Power Corporation that it was

not notified of said application since there was proper publication.

As regards the claim of the National Power Corporation that the lots involved are covered by Proclamation No. 599 dated June 23, 1951, in its favor, said proclamation expressly provides that the land described therein is withdrawn 'from sale of (sic) settlement and reserved for the Angat River Project of the National Power Corporation under its administration, subject to private rights, if any there be x x x.' (Underscoring supplied)

It appearing that applicant Alejandro C. Mamot was in actual possession of the subject lots long before the Proclamation, his rights are respected and recognized by the very proclamation, not to mention the fact that the National Power Corporation has instituted Civil Case No. 2526 before Branch II of this Court, an action for eminent domain, against several persons occupying the area covered by the proclamation.

This Court also noted that the petition for review was filed after the lapse of one year from the issuance of the decree, and on this score alone, the petition could be dismissed."

Its motion for reconsideration of the Order of November 25, 1971 having been denied, NPC appealed to the Court of Appeals. It assailed as erroneous the trial court's holding that: (a) the registration of the parcels of land was not procured through fraud; (b) the decree of registration was valid even if it was based on a decision which had been set aside, and (c) the parcels of land are registerable under Sec. 48(b) of Commonwealth Act No. 141, as amended.

In its decision of February 2, 1977, the Court of Appeals^[19] affirmed the decision of the lower court. Noting that the appeal was from the Order of the trial court denying the NPC's petition for review of decree and not from the judgment decreeing the registration of the subject parcels of land in favor of Mamot and Sarmiento, the Court of Appeals found it unnecessary to discuss the second and third assigned errors as "they do not relate to the dismissal of the petition for review of decree."

Thus, the Court of Appeals ruled that actual fraud alone does not warrant the review of a decree of registration as it must be coupled with a showing of the petitioner's dominical right over the subject properties. Emphasizing that Proclamation No. 599 is "not an absolute grant of reservation" as it is subject to private rights, the Court of Appeals held that the NPC "failed to show its real dominical right over the subject lots" and that, on such failure alone, the appeal could not succeed. The Court of Appeals added that the issue of actual fraud had become moot and academic because "whether there is actual fraud or none, this Court cannot order the reopening of the final decree."

Dissatisfied, the NPC instituted the instant petition for review on certiorari based on the following grounds: (a) the Court of First Instance of Bulacan as land registration court lacked jurisdiction to decree the registration of the six parcels of land as they are within the Angat River Watershed Reservation reserved to the NPC by presidential proclamation; (b) the procurement of a decree over lands which are non-alienable is equivalent to actual fraud in the procurement of a decree, and (c) the decree of registration based on a decision previously set aside by the court is absolutely null and void.^[20]

We opt to settle first the third ground for the petition, a procedural one, to facilitate the determination of the substantive issues raised herein.

Petitioner contends that since the decree of registration was issued on May 7, 1970 by the Land Registration Commission (LRC) after the amended Decision of November 13, 1969 had been set aside by the allowance of its petition for relief from judgment by the lower court on March 17, 1970, the decree of registration was a complete nullity. Although this contention appears to be meritorious on its face, the circumstances of the case point to a negative conclusion.

Rule 38, Sec. 7 of the Rules of Court provides that where a judgment is set aside or when a petition for relief from judgment is granted, the court “shall proceed to hear and determine the case as if timely motion for a new trial had been granted therein.” Thus, an order granting a petition for relief is interlocutory unlike an order denying such petition which is final and appealable.[21] When the LRC issued the decree of registration, the decision directing such issuance had been set aside by virtue of the granting of the petition for relief from judgment. It should be recalled that when a new trial is granted, “the original judgment shall be vacated, and the action shall stand for trial de novo.”[22] Consequently, the instant case reverted back to its status prior to the promulgation of the amended decision. It follows, therefore, that no valid decree of registration could have sprung from the proceedings in the lower court because the situation became one where there was as yet no existing decision directing the issuance of such decree.

However, when the lower court subsequently denied the same petition for relief from judgment, an action which was still well within its discretion to take as no new judgment had as yet been rendered subsequent to the grant of said petition, the case returned to its status of being a decided one. Was the denial based on a valid ground? According to the aforequoted portion of the February 3, 1971 Order, the denial or “dismissal” of the petition was based on the LRC’s issuance of the May 7, 1970 decree of registration, which, to the mind of the court, terminated the proceedings before it. While this may not be a valid ground as it only shows that the LRC issued the decree of registration because it had not been notified of the Order granting the petition for relief from judgment, the denial nonetheless is proper: a close scrutiny of the records reveals that the NPC’s petition for relief from judgment should have been denied in the first instance.

The NPC raised therein the issue of lack of due process by its allegation that no proper notice about the registration proceedings had been given it. Lack of personal notice in a registration proceeding to persons who may claim certain rights or interests in the property, however, cannot vitiate or invalidate the decree or title issued therein because proceedings to register land under Act No. 496 are in rem and not in personam.[23] Defendants by publication, including the Government and its branches and instrumentalities, are bound by a decree of registration because all interested parties are considered as notified by the publication required by law.[24] Moreover, the NPC’s contention that it had not been given proper notice appears to be grounded on its stand that Mamot knew that the land he was trying to register was embraced by Proclamation No. 599. This contention does not, however, substantiate the NPC’s claim of lack of due process in view of the uncontroverted fact of publication of Mamot’s application for registration.

By alleging that Mamot committed fraud in failing to state in his application that the lots are covered by Proclamation No. 599 despite his knowledge of NPC’s rights and interests on the land, the NPC appears to have forgotten the established fact that Mamot had been in possession of the property long before the issuance of Proclamation No. 599. In the absence of any evidence that the omission was deliberate, Mamot cannot be faulted for his failure to allege in the complaint that the parcels of land are within the area covered by said proclamation. That Mamot was indeed a prior possessor of the land is best shown by the fact that, as found by the trial court, the NPC even made Mamot one of the respondents in the eminent domain case it had filed to pursue its purposes under said proclamation by constructing the Angat access road.

The bases for the NPC’s petition for relief from judgment being unmeritorious, the lower court correctly denied it. However, by upholding the lower court’s second and belated action on the said petition, the Court does not stamp its approval on the manner by which the said petition was handled. A thorough study of its grounds would have prevented the court’s clearly flip-flopping stand on the matter, particularly because the petition was one for relief from judgment. It bears stressing that a petition for relief from judgment, being an “act of grace,” is not regarded with favor and it should be availed of only in exceptional circumstances or when the demands of equity

and justice should prompt the court to give the petitioner a last chance to defend his right or to protect his interest.[25] The petitioner must satisfactorily show that he has faithfully and strictly complied with the provisions of Rule 38.[26] Moreover, to obtain relief from judgment, it is necessary to determine not only the existence of any of the grounds relied on, whether it be fraud, accident, mistake or excusable negligence, but also whether the petitioner has a good cause of action.[27] In this case, the substantive issues raised by the NPC in its petition for relief from judgment are similar, if not identical to those raised in its petition for review of the decree of registration, the denial of which is the very subject of the instant petition for review on certiorari. It is proper, therefore, that they be discussed simultaneously.

Proclamation No. 599, which was issued by then President Carlos P. Garcia on June 23, 1959, provides:

“Upon the recommendation of the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and pursuant to the provisions of Section 83 of Commonwealth Act No. 141, as amended, I, CARLOS P. GARCIA, President of the Philippines, do hereby withdraw from sale or settlement and reserve for the Angat River Project of the National Power Corporation under its administration, subject to private rights, if any there be, a certain parcel of the public domain situated partly in the municipality of Norzagaray, and partly in the municipality of San Jose, province of Bulacan, Island of Luzon, and more particularly described as follows: x x x.” (Underscoring supplied.)

As correctly interpreted by the Court of Appeals, this provision of the presidential proclamation does not bestow upon the NPC absolute dominical or proprietary rights. The NPC’s powers over the area designated as the Angat River reserve are “subject to private rights, if any there be.” This particular provision cannot but be interpreted to mean that the NPC’s administrative jurisdiction over the area is delimited by then existing private rights. Was the claim of Mamot “existing” at the time of the issuance of the proclamation? We quote from the uncontroverted findings of the lower court in its November 13, 1969 decision:

“From the evidence presented, it appears that portions of the parcels of land which are sought to be registered were originally owned and possessed publicly, peacefully, continuously and adversely by Domingo Mamot and Damasa Calubag, parents of the herein applicant, for more than seven (7) years until the death of Domingo Mamot on July 22, 1924, whereupon his ownership and possession thereof was (sic) continued by his wife, Damasa Calubag, and the herein applicant who immediately succeeded him; that Damasa Calubag and the herein applicant, commonly possessed the portions of the subject parcels of land which were left by Domingo Mamot, peacefully, publicly and continuously, adversely and in the concept of owners until January 23, 1944, when Damasa Calubag died and was immediately succeeded in the possession and ownership thereof by the herein applicant who continued the possession of the same, peacefully, notoriously, publicly and uninterruptedly up to the present and who executed an affidavit of adjudication of the property unto himself (Exhibit ‘I’); that the other portion of said parcels of land was acquired by the herein applicant thru cultivation and peaceful, adverse, open, and continuous possession thereof from 1928 to the present which is now more than thirty (30) years; that there are some persons who tried to claim the subject parcels of land but they have never been in possession of the same, and Isidro Ordoña, Pedro Sarmiento, Consolacion Duya and Simeon Patawaran were even named in the application and were served with copies of the Notice of Initial Hearing (Exhibit ‘A’) by ordinary mail on January 9, 1969, by the Commissioner of Land Registration (Exhibit ‘B’) but have not interposed any opposition to the present application with the exception of Pedro Sarmiento who, however, later withdrew his opposition for Lot 4 of plan Psu-162460-Amd. which was being claimed by him (and) was conveyed to him by the applicant, Alejandro Mamot, as evidenced by the Deed of Sale which was executed and entered into by applicant Alejandro Mamot and said Pedro Sarmiento on September 25, 1969, and acknowledged on the same date before Nicasio Bartolome, a notary public of Norzagaray, Bulacan, and registered in his notarial book as Document No. 644, Page No. 51, Book No. II and Series of 1969; that the subject parcel of land is not within any military or naval reservation; and that the land tax for the current year has been paid (Exhibit ‘J’).”

With these factual findings, the lower court cannot be faulted for confirming Mamot's imperfect title because under Sec. 48(b) of Commonwealth Act No. 141, as amended by Republic Act No. 1942,[28] proven occupation and cultivation for more than thirty (30) years by an applicant and by his predecessors-in-interest, vest title on such applicant so as to segregate the land from the mass of public land. When the conditions set by law are complied with, the possessor of the land, by operation of law, acquires a right to a grant, a government grant, without the necessity of a certificate of title being issued. As such, the land ceases to be part of the public domain and goes beyond the authority of the Director of Lands to dispose of. An application for confirmation of title, therefore, becomes a mere formality.[29]

The law, however, may not be applied in all cases. The circumstances of a particular case may require an applicant for confirmation of an imperfect title under Sec. 48 of Commonwealth Act No. 141, to prove that the land involved no longer forms part of the inalienable public domain.[30] Such is the case in this instant petition. The land sought to be confirmed as under the ownership of private respondent is within the area covered by Proclamation No. 599 creating a reservation for the Angat River Project of the NPC. Mamot knew about the NPC's authority over the area inasmuch as he had even been named a respondent in the eminent domain proceeding that the NPC had filed. While the filing of such proceeding may be construed as a recognition on the part of the government that the land is indeed privately owned, the fact that the land is part of the watershed area reserved for the Angat River Project should be the paramount consideration. As such, extreme caution should be exercised in the determination of claims of ownership by private persons which the proclamation itself recognizes. All claimants must prove by clear, positive and absolute evidence that they have complied with all the requirements of the law for confirmation of an imperfect title to the land applied for.[31]

Hence, Mamot bears the burden of overcoming the presumption that the land still forms part of the nondisposable public domain. The classification of public lands being an exclusive prerogative of the Executive Department,[32] presentation of evidence issued by the Director of Lands that the land he sought to be confirmed as his has been classified as disposable for private ownership would have helped Mamot in obtaining approval of his application. Since he failed to present such evidence, whatever possession he might have had, and however long, cannot ripen into private ownership.[33]

This case has been pending for more than twenty-four years. To remand it below for a determination of the validity of NPC's claims under its petition for review of decree would not serve any purpose except to further delay the resolution of the application for registration.[34] Moreover, the peculiar circumstances attending this case demand its immediate resolution. As discussed above, the NPC has no vested absolute dominical right over the whole area reserved for the Angat River Project. Its administrative authority over lands embraced by the proclamation is delimited by vested private rights. On the other hand, Mamot had not satisfactorily proven his right to a confirmation of his imperfect title and to the registration of the land in his name subject to the rights of Sarmiento who had acquired Lot 4 by virtue of a deed of sale. Nor had he presented any proof that the said land has been declared disposable by the proper government authority. The land in question must, therefore, remain where it can be of better use to the general public - as part of the inalienable public domain.

WHEREFORE, the decision appealed from is REVERSED AND SET ASIDE insofar as it affirms the order of the lower court allowing the issuance of a decree of registration in favor of private respondent Alejandro Mamot. No costs.

SO ORDERED.

Gutierrez, Jr., (Chairman), Bidin, Davide, Jr., and Melo, JJ., concur.

- [1] There is an inconsistency with respect to this date. The Record on Appeal (p. 1) shows that the application for registration of title was filed on August 19, 1968 while both the petition (p. 4) and the Court of Appeals decision (Rollo, p. 31) indicate the date of filing as June 6, 1968.
- [2] The application was later transferred to Branch V of the same court sitting at Sta. Maria, Bulacan wherein it was docketed as Land Registration Case No. (SM) N-014.
- [3] Per Judge Ambrosio M. Geraldez of the Sta. Maria Court (Annex “C” of the Record on Appeal).
- [4] Record on Appeal, pp. 446-448.
- [5] Ibid, pp. 442-445.
- [6] Ibid, pp. 454-455.
- [7] Ibid, p. 456.
- [8] Ibid, pp. 457-460.
- [9] Record on Appeal, p. 462. Said section provides in detail for the procedure to be undertaken in the General Land Registration Office in the preparation of the decree, its transcription in the Registration Book by the register of deeds until the delivery of the owner’s duplicate certificate to the owner of the property.
- [10] Ibid, p. 463.
- [11] Ibid, p. 464.
- [12] Record on Appeal, pp. 468-470.
- [13] Ibid, p. 473.
- [14] Record on Appeal, p. 474.
- [15] Ibid, p. 471.
- [16] Record on Appeal, pp. 518-519.
- [17] Ibid, p. 524.
- [18] Ibid, p. 550-551.
- [19] Justice Sixto A. Domondon, ponente, with Justices Magno S. Gatmaitan and Samuel F. Reyes, concurring.
- [20] Petition, p. 6; Rollo, p. 24.
- [21] Service Specialists, Inc. v. Sheriff of Manila, G.R. No. 74586, October 17, 1986, 145 SCRA 139.
- [22] Section 5, Rule 37.
- [23] Aguilar, et al. v. Caoagdan, et al., 105 Phil. 661 (1959).
- [24] Sorongon v. Makalintal, 80 Phil. 259 (1948).
- [25] Manila Electric Company v. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 88396, July 4, 1990, 187 SCRA 200; Bermudo v. Court of Appeals, L-38622, October 26, 1987, 155 SCRA 8.
- [26] Philippine Rabbit Bus Lines, Inc. v. Arciaga, L-29701, March 16, 1987, 148 SCRA 433; Hagosojos v. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 59690, October 28, 1987, 155 SCRA 175.

[27] *Somoso v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 78050, October 23, 1989, 178 SCRA 654.

[28] As amended by Republic Act No. 1942 which took effect on June 22, 1957, Section 48 (b) states:

“(b) Those who by themselves or through their predecessors in interest have been in open, continuous, exclusive, and notorious possession and occupation of agricultural lands of the public domain, under a bona fide claim of acquisition of ownership, for at least thirty years immediately preceding the filing of the application for confirmation of title except when prevented by war or force majeure. These shall be conclusively presumed to have performed all the conditions essential to a Government grant and shall be entitled to a certificate of title under the provisions of this chapter.”

[29] *Director of Lands v. Iglesia ni Kristo*, G.R. No. 54276, August 16, 1991, 200 SCRA 606, citing *Director of Lands v. Intermediate Appellate Court*, G.R. No. 73002, December 29, 1986, 146 SCRA 509.

[30] *Director of Lands v. Intermediate Appellate Court*, G.R. No. 70825, March 11, 1991, 195 SCRA 38, 45, citing *Heirs of Amunategui v. Director of Forestry*, L-30035, November 29, 1983, 126 SCRA 69 and *Director of Lands v. Funtilar*, G.R. No. 68533, May 23, 1986, 142 SCRA 57, 59.

[31] *Republic v. Lee*, G.R. No. 64818, May 13, 1991, 197 SCRA 13.

[32] *Solis v. Intermediate Appellate Court*, G.R. No. 72486, June 19, 1991, 198 SCRA 267, 273.

[33] *Director of Lands v. Intermediate Appellate Court*, G.R. No. 70825 *supra*, citing *Director of Lands v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 58867, June 22, 1984, 129 SCRA 689; *Director of Forestry v. Munoz*, L-24796, June 28, 1968, 23 SCRA 1184; *Director of Lands v. Abanzadao*, L-21814, July 15, 1975, 65 SCRA 5 and *Republic v. Court of Appeals*, L-39473, April 30, 1979, 89 SCRA 648.

[34] See: *Filipinas Manufacturers Bank v. Eastern Rizal Fabricators*, G.R. No. L-62741, May 29, 1987, 150 SCRA 443.

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