

LIAN GA BAY LOGGING, CO., INC., PETITIONER, VS. HON. MANUEL LOPEZ ENAGE, IN HIS CAPACITY AS PRESIDING JUDGE OF BRANCH II OF THE COURT OF FIRST INSTANCE OF AGUSAN AND AGO TIMBER

...

G.R. No. L-30637. July 16, 1987

Ponente: TEEHANKEE, C.J.

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The Court grants the petition for certiorari and prohibition and holds that respondent judge, absent any showing of grave abuse of discretion, has no competence nor authority to review anew the decision in administrative proceedings of respondents public officials (director of forestry, secretary or agriculture and natural resources and assistant executive secretaries of the Office or the President) in determining the correct boundary line of the licensed timber areas of the contending parties. The Court reaffirms the established principle that findings of fact by an administrative board or agency or official, following a hearing, are binding upon the courts and will not be disturbed except where the board, agency and/or official(s) have gone beyond their statutory authority, exercised unconstitutional powers or clearly acted arbitrarily and without regard to their duty or with grave abuse of discretion.

The parties herein are both forest concessionaries whose licensed areas are adjacent to each other. The concession of petitioner Lianga Bay Logging Corporation Co., Inc. (hereinafter referred to as petitioner Lianga) as described in its Timber License Agreement No. 49, is located in the municipalities of Tago, Cagwait, Marihatag and Lianga, all in the Province of Surigao, consisting of 110,406 hectares, more or less, while that of respondent Ago Timber Corporation (hereinafter referred to as respondent Ago) granted under Ordinary Timber License No. 1323-60 [New] is located at Los Arcos and San Salvador, Province of Agusan, with an approximate area of 4,000 hectares. It was a part of a forest area of 9,000 hectares originally licensed to one Narciso Lansang under Ordinary Timber License No. 584-52.

Since the concessions of petitioner and respondent are adjacent to each other, they have a common boundary - the Agusan- Surigao Provincial boundary - whereby the eastern boundary of respondent Ago's concession is petitioner Lianga's western boundary. The western boundary of petitioner Lianga is described as "x x x Corner 5, a point in the intersection of the Agusan- Surigao Provincial boundary and Los Arcos-Lianga Road; thence following Agusan-Surigao Provincial boundary in a general northerly and northwesterly and northerly directions about 39,500 meters to Corner 6, a point at the intersection of the Agusan- Surigao Provincial boundary and Nalagdao Creek xx x." The eastern boundary of respondent Ago's concession is described as "x xx point 4, along the Agusan-Surigao boundary; thence following Agusan-Surigao boundary in a general southeasterly and southerly directions about 12,000 meters to point 5, a point along Los Arcos-Lianga Road; x x x." [1]

Because of reports of encroachment by both parties on each other's concession areas, the Director of Forestry ordered a survey to establish on the ground the common boundary of their respective concession areas. Forester

Cipriano Melchor undertook the survey and fixed the common boundary as "Corner 5 of Lianga Bay Logging Company at Km. 10.2 instead of Km. 9.7 on the Lianga Arcos Road and lines N90°E, 21,000 meters; N12°W, 21,150 meters; N40°W, 3,000 meters; N31°W, 2,800 meters; N 50°W, 1,700 meters" which respondent Ago protested claiming that "its eastern boundary should be the provincial boundary line of Agusan-Surigao as described in Section 1 of Art. 1693 of the Philippine Commission as indicated in the green pencil in the attached sketch" of the areas as prepared by the Bureau of Forestry. [2] The Director of Forestry, after considering the evidence, found:

"That the claim of the Ago Timber Corporation portrays a line (green line) far different in alignment with the line (red) as indicated in the original License Control Map of this Office;

"That the claim of the Ago Timber Corporation (green line) does not conform to the distance of 6,800 meters from point 3 to point 4 of the original description of the area of Narciso Lansang but would project said line to a distance of approximately 13,800 meters;

"That to follow the claim of the Ago Timber Corporation would increase the area of Narciso Lansang from 9,000 to 12,360 hectares;

"That to follow the claim of the Ago Timber Corporation would reduce the area of the Lianga Bay Logging, Co., Inc. to 107,046 hectares instead of the area granted which is 110,406 hectares."

and ruled that "the claim of the Ago Timber Corporation runs counter to the intentions of this Office in granting the license of Mr. Narciso Lansang; and further, that it also runs counter to the intentions of this Office in granting the Timber License Agreement to the Lianga Bay Logging Co., Inc. The intentions of this Office in granting the two licenses (Lansang and Lianga Bay Logging Co., Inc.) are patently manifest in that distances and bearings are the controlling factors. If mention was ever made of the Agusan-Surigao boundary, as the common boundary line of both licensees, this Office could not have meant the Agusan-Surigao boundary as described under Section 1 of Act 1693 of the Philippine Commission for were it so it could have been so easy for this Office to mention the distance from point 3 to point 4 of Narciso Lansang as approximately 13,800 meters. This cannot be considered a mistake considering that the percentage of error which is more or less 103% is too high an error to be committed by an Office manned by competent technical men. The Agusan-Surigao boundary as mentioned in the technical descriptions of both licensees is, therefore, patently an imaginary line based on B.F. License Control Map. Such being the case, it is reiterated that distance and bearings control the description where an imaginary line exists." [3] The decision fixed the common boundary of the licensed areas of the Ago Timber Corporation and Lianga Bay Logging Co., Inc. as that indicated in red pencil of the sketch attached to the decision.

In an appeal interposed by respondent Ago, docketed in the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources as DANR Case No. 2268, the then Acting Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources Jose Y. Feliciano, in a decision dated August 9, 1965 set aside the appealed decision of the Director of Forestry and ruled that "(T)he common boundary line of the licensed areas of the Ago Timber Corporation and the Lianga Bay Logging Co., Inc., should be that indicated by the green line on the same sketch which had been made an integral part of the appealed decision." [4]

Petitioner elevated the case to the Office of the President, where in a decision dated June 16, 1966, signed by then Assistant Executive Secretary Jose J. Leido, Jr., the ruling of the then Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources was affirmed. [5] On motion for reconsideration, the Office of the President issued another decision dated August 9, 1968 signed by then Assistant Executive Secretary Gilberto Duavit reversing and overturning the decision of the then Acting Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and affirming in toto and reinstating the decision, dated March 20, 1961, of the Director of Forestry. [6]

Respondent Ago filed a motion for reconsideration of the decision dated August 9, 1968 of the Office of the President but after written opposition of petitioner Lianga, the same was denied in an order dated October 2, 1968, signed by then Assistant Executive Secretary Jose J. Leido, Jr.[7]

On October 21, 1968, a new action was commenced by Ago Timber Corporation as plaintiff, in the Court of First Instance of Agusan, Branch II; docketed thereat as Civil Case No. 1253, against Lianga Bay Logging Co., Inc., Assistant Executive Secretaries Jose J. Leido, Jr. and Gilberto M. Duavit and Director of Forestry, as defendants, for "Determination of Correct Boundary Line of License Timber Areas and Damages with Preliminary Injunction" reiterating once more the same question raised and passed upon in DANR Case No. 2268 and insisting that "a judicial review of such divergent administrative decisions is necessary in order to determine the correct boundary line of the licensed areas in question." [8]

As prayed for, respondent judge issued a temporary restraining order on October 28, 1968, on a bond of P20,000, enjoining the defendants from carrying out the decision of the Office of the President. The corresponding writ was issued the next day, or on October 29, 1968.[9]

On November 10, 1968, defendant Lianga (herein petitioner) moved for dismissal of the complaint and for dissolution of the temporary restraining order on grounds that the complaint states no cause of action and that the court has no jurisdiction over the- person of respondent public officials and respondent corporation. It also submitted its opposition to plaintiffs (herein respondent) prayer for the issuance of a writ of preliminary injunction.[10] A supplemental motion was filed on December 6, 1968.[11]

On December 19, 1968, the lower court issued an order denying petitioner Lianga's motion to dismiss and granting the writ of preliminary injunction prayed for by respondent Ago.[12] Lianga' s Motion for Reconsideration of the Order was denied on May 9, 1969.[13] Hence, this petition praying of the Court (a) to declare that the Director of Forestry has the exclusive jurisdiction to determine the common boundary of the licensed areas of petitioners and respondents and that the decision of the Office of the President dated August 9, 1968 is final and executory; (b) to order the dismissal of Civil Case No. 1253 in the Court of First Instance of Agusan; (c) to declare that respondent Judge acted without jurisdiction or in excess of jurisdiction and with grave abuse of discretion, amounting to lack of jurisdiction, in issuing the temporary restraining order dated October 28, 1968 and granting the preliminary injunction per its Order dated December 19, 1968; and (d) to annul the aforementioned orders.

After respondent's comments on the petition and petitioner's reply thereto, this Court on June 30, 1969 issued a restraining order enjoining in turn the enforcement of the preliminary injunction and related orders issued by the respondent court in Civil Case No. 1253.[14]

The Court finds merit in the petition.

Respondent Judge erred in taking cognizance of the complaint filed by respondent Ago, asking for the determination anew of the correct boundary line of its licensed timber area, for the same issue had already been determined by the Director of Forestry, the Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Office of the President, administrative officials under whose jurisdictions the matter properly belongs. Section 1816 of the Revised Administrative Code vests in the Bureau of Forestry, the jurisdiction and authority over the demarcation, protection, management, reproduction, reforestation, occupancy, and use of all public forests and forest reserves and over the granting of licenses for game and fish, and for the taking of forest products, including stone and earth therefrom. The Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, as department head, may repeal or modify the decision of the Director of Forestry when advisable in the public interests,[15] whose decision is in turn appealable to the Office of the President.[16]

In giving due course to the complaint below, the respondent court would necessarily have to assess and evaluate anew all the evidence presented in the administrative proceedings,[17] which is beyond its competence and jurisdiction. For the respondent court to consider and weigh again the evidence already presented and passed upon by said officials would be to allow it to substitute its judgment for that of said officials who are in a better position to consider and weigh the same in the light of the authority specifically vested in them by law. Such a posture cannot be entertained, for it is a well-settled doctrine that the courts of justice will generally not interfere with purely administrative matters which are addressed to the sound discretion of government agencies and their expertise unless there is a clear showing that the latter acted arbitrarily or with grave abuse of discretion or when they have acted in a capricious and whimsical manner such that their action may amount to an excess or lack of jurisdiction. [18]

A doctrine long recognized is that where the law confines in an administrative office the power to determine particular questions or matters, upon the facts to be presented, the jurisdiction of such office shall prevail over the courts.[19]

The general rule, under the principles of administrative law in force in this jurisdiction, is that decisions of administrative officers shall not be disturbed by the courts, except when the former have acted without or in excess of their jurisdiction, or with grave abuse of discretion. Findings of administrative officials and agencies who have acquired expertise because their jurisdiction is confined to specific matters are generally accorded not only respect but at times even finality of such findings are supported by substantial evidence. [20] As recently stressed by the Court, "in this era of clogged court dockets, the need for specialized administrative boards or commissions with the special knowledge, experience and capability to hear and determine promptly disputes on technical matters or essentially factual matters, subject to judicial review in case of grave abuse of discretion, has become well nigh indispensable." [21]

The facts and circumstances in the instant case are similar to the earlier case of *Pajo, et al. v. Ago, et al.*[22] (where therein respondent Pastor Ago is the president of herein respondent Ago Timber Corporation). In the said case, therein respondent Pastor Ago, after an adverse decision of the Director of Forestry, Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Executive Secretary in connection with his application for renewal of his expired timber licenses, filed with the Court of First instance of Agusan a petition for certiorari, prohibition and damages with preliminary injunction alleging that the rejection of his application for renewal by the Director of Forestry and Secretary of Agriculture and- Natural Resources and its affirmance by the Executive Secretary constituted an abuse of discretion and was therefore illegal. The Court held that "there can be no question that petitioner Director of Forestry has jurisdiction over the grant or renewal of respondent Ago's timber license (Sec. 1816, Rev. Adm. Code); that petitioner Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources as department head, is empowered by law to affirm, modify or reject said grant or renewal of respondent Ago's timber license by petitioner Director of Forestry (Sec. 79[c1, Rev. Adm. Code); and that petitioner Executive Secretary, acting for and in behalf and by authority of the President has, likewise, jurisdiction to affirm, modify or reverse the orders regarding the grant or renewal of said timber license by the two aforementioned officials." The Court went on to say that, "(I)n the case of *Espinosa, et al. v. v. Makalintal, et al.* (79 Phil. 134; 45 Off. Gaz. 712), we held that the powers granted to the Secretary of Agriculture and Commerce (Natural Resources) by law regarding the disposition of public lands such as granting of licenses, permits, leases, and contracts or approving, rejecting, reinstating, or cancelling applications or deciding conflicting applications, are all executive and administrative in nature. It is a well-recognized principle that purely administrative and discretionary functions may not be interfered with by the courts. In general, courts have no supervising power over the proceedings and actions of the administrative departments of the government. This is generally true with respect to acts involving the exercise of judgment or discretion, and findings of fact by an administrative board, agency or official,

following a hearing, are binding upon the courts and will not be disturbed except where the board, agency or official has gone beyond his statutory authority, exercised unconstitutional powers or clearly acted arbitrarily and without regard to his duty or with grave abuse of discretion. And we have repeatedly held that there is grave abuse of discretion justifying the issuance of the writ of certiorari only when there is capricious and whimsical exercise of judgment as is equivalent to lack of jurisdiction. (*Abad Santos v. Province of Tarlac*, 67 Phil. 480; *Tan vs. People*, 88 Phil. 609)"

Respondent Ago contends that the motion filed by petitioner Lianga for reconsideration of the decision of the Office of the President was denied in an alleged "decision" dated August 15, 1966, allegedly signed by then Assistant Executive Secretary Jose J. Leido, Jr. that, "however, for some mysterious, unknown if not anomalous reasons and/or illegal considerations, the-'decision' allegedly dated August 15, 1966 (Annex "D") was never released" and instead a decision was released on August 9, 1968, signed by then Assistant Executive Secretary Gilberto M. Duavit, which reversed the findings and conclusions of the Office of the President in its first decision dated June 16, 1966 and signed by then Assistant Executive Secretary Leido.

It is elementary that a draft of a decision does not operate as judgment on a case until the same is duly signed and delivered to the clerk for filing and promulgation. A decision cannot be considered as binding on the parties until its promulgation.[23] Respondent should be aware of this rule. In still another case of *Ago v. Court of Appeals*,[24] (where herein respondent Ago was the petitioner) the Court held that, "While it is to be presumed that the judgment that was dictated in open court will be the judgment of the court, the court may still modify said order as the same is being put into writing. And even if the order or judgment has already been put into writing and signed, while it has not yet been delivered to the clerk for filing, it is still subject to amendment or change by the judge. It is only when the judgment signed by the judge is actually filed with the clerk of court that it becomes a valid and binding judgment. Prior thereto, it could still be subject to amendment and change and may not, therefore, constitute the real judgment of the court."

Respondent alleges "that in view of the hopelessly conflicting decisions of the administrative bodies and/or offices of the Philippine government, and the important questions of law and fact involved therein, as well as the well-grounded fear and suspicion that some anomalous, illicit and unlawful considerations had intervened in the concealment of the decision of August 15, 1966 (Annex "D") of Assistant Executive Secretary Gilberto M. Duavit, a judicial review of such divergent administrative decisions is necessary in order to determine the correct boundary line of the licensed areas in question and restore the faith and confidence of the people in the actions of our public officials and in our system of administration of justice."

The mere suspicion of respondent that there were anomalies in the non-release of the Leido "decision" allegedly denying petitioner's motion for reconsideration and the substitution thereof by the Duavit decision granting reconsideration does not justify judicial review. Beliefs, suspicions and conjectures cannot overcome the presumption of regularity and legality of official actions.[25] It is presumed that an official of a department performs his official duties regularly.[26] It should be noted, furthermore that as hereinabove stated with regard to the case history in the Office of the President, Ago's motion for reconsideration of the Duavit decision dated August 9, 1968 was denied in the Order dated October 2, 1968 and signed by Assistant Executive Secretary Leido himself (who thereby joined in the reversal of his own first decision dated June 16, 1966 and signed by himself).

The Ordinary Timber License No. 1323-'60 [New] which approved the transfer to respondent Ago of the 4,000 hectares from the forest area originally licensed to Narciso Lansano stipulates certain conditions, terms and limitations, among which were: that the decision of the Director of Forestry as to the exact location of its licensed areas is final; that the license is subject to whatever decision that may be rendered on the boundary conflict between the Lianga Bay Logging Co. and the Ago Timber Corporation; that the terms and conditions of the

license are subject to change at the discretion of the Director of Forestry and the license may be made to expire at an earlier date. Under Section 1834 of the Revised Administrative Code, the Director of Forestry, upon granting any license, may prescribe and insert therein such terms, conditions, and limitations, not inconsistent with law, as may be deemed by him to be in the public interest. The license operates as a contract between the government and respondent. Respondent, therefore, is estopped from questioning the terms and stipulations thereof.

Clearly, the injunctive writ should not have been issued. The provisions of law explicitly provide that Courts of First Instance shall have the power to issue writ of injunction, mandamus, certiorari, prohibition, quo warranto and habeas corpus in their respective places,[27] if the petition filed relates to the acts or omissions of an inferior court, or of a corporation, board, officer or person, within their jurisdiction. [28]

The jurisdiction or authority of the Court of First Instance to control or restrain acts by means of the writ of injunction is limited only to acts which are being committed within the territorial boundaries of their respective provinces or districts[29] except where the sole issue is the legality of the decision of the administrative officials.[30]

In the leading case of *Palanan Lumber Plywood Co., Inc. v. Arranz*,[31] which involved a petition for certiorari and prohibition filed in the Court of First Instance of Isabela against the same respondent public officials as here and where the administrative proceedings taken were similar to the case at bar, the Court laid down the rule that: "We agree with petitioner that the respondent Court acted without jurisdiction in issuing a preliminary injunction against the petitioners Executive Secretary, Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Director of Forestry, who have their official residences in Manila and Quezon City, outside of the territorial jurisdiction of the respondent Court of First Instance of Isabela. Both the statutory provisions and the settled jurisdiction of this Court unanimously affirm that the extraordinary writs issued by the Court of First Instance are limited to and operative only within their respective provinces and districts."

A different rule applies only when the point in controversy relates solely to a determination of a question of law whether the decision of the respondent administrative officials was legally correct or not.[32] We thus declared in *Director of Forestry v. Ruiz*: [33] "In *Palanan Lumber & Plywood Co., Inc.*, supra, we reaffirmed the rule of non-jurisdiction of courts of first instance to issue injunctive writs in order to control acts outside of their premises or districts. We went further and said that when the petition filed with the courts of first instance not only questions the legal correctness of the decision of administrative officials but also seeks to enjoin the enforcement of the said decision, the court could not validly issue the writ of injunction when the officials sought to be restrained from enforcing the decision are not stationed within its territory.

"To recapitulate, insofar as injunctive or prohibitory writs are concerned, the rule still stands that courts of first instance have the power to issue writs limited to and operative only within their respective provinces or districts."

The writ of preliminary injunction issued by respondent court is furthermore void, since it appears that the forest area described in the injunctive writ includes areas not licensed to respondent Ago. The forest area referred to and described therein comprises the whole area originally licensed to Narciso Lansang under the earlier Ordinary Timber License No. 584-52. Only a portion of this area was in fact transferred to respondent Ago as described in its Ordinary Timber License No. 1323-'60[New].

It is abundantly clear that respondent court has no jurisdiction over the subject matter of Civil Case No. 1253 of the Court of First Instance of Agusan nor has it jurisdiction to decide on the common boundary of the licensed areas of petitioner Lianga and respondent Ago, as determined by respondents public officials against whom no case of grave abuse of discretion has been made. Absent a cause of action and jurisdiction, respondent Judge acted with grave abuse of discretion and excess, if not lack, of jurisdiction in refusing to dismiss the case under review

and in issuing the writ of preliminary injunction enjoining the enforcement of the final decision dated August 9, 1968 and the order affirming the same dated October 2, 1968 of the Office of the President.

ACCORDINGLY, the petition for certiorari and prohibition is granted. The restraining order heretofore issued by the Court against enforcement of the preliminary injunction and related orders issued by respondent judge in the case below is made permanent and the respondent judge or whoever has taken his place is hereby ordered to dismiss Civil Case No. 1253.

SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, Cruz, Paras, and Gancatco, JJ., concur.

[1] Decision of the Director of Forestry, dated March 20, 1961, p. 108, Rollo.

[2] P. 109, Rollo.

[3] P. 109, Rollo, italics supplied.

[4] P. 148, Rollo.

[5] Pp. 149-154, Rollo.

[6] Pp. 157-167, Rollo.

[7] P. 168, Rollo.

[8] Pp. 124-138, Rollo.

[9] Pp. 171-177, Rollo.

[10] Pp. 178-212, Rollo.

[11] Pp. 238-256.

[12] Pp. 332-339, Rollo.

[13] P. 381, Rollo.

[14] P. 382, Rollo.

[15] Sec. 79(c), Rev. Adm. Code.

[16] Executive Order No. 19, dated April 2, 1966.

[17] *Ganitano v. Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources*, 16 SCRA 534.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *R.B. Industrial Development Co. Ltd. vs. Enage*, 24 SCRA 365.

[20] *Comm. of Customs vs. Valencia*, 100 Phil. 165. See also *Special Events and Central Shipping Office Workers Union vs. San Miguel Corporation*, 122 SCRA 557 citing *International Hardwood and Veneer Co., of the Philippines vs. Hon. Vicente Leogardo, et al.*, 117 SCRA 967; *Genconsu Free Workers Union vs. Inciong*, 91 SCRA 311; *Dy Keh Beng v. International Labor and Marine Union of the Phil.*, 90 SCRA 162.

[21] *Abejo vs. De la Cruz*, G.R. No. 63558, May 19, 1987.

[22] 108 Phil. 905 (1960).

[23] Vda. de Potenciano v. Gruenberg, 4 SCRA 127.

[24] 6 SCRA 530 (1962); see also People v. Soria, 22 SCRA 948; Comia v. Nicolas, 29 SCRA 492.

[25] Tolentino vs. Catoy, 82 Phil. 300.

[26] Quien v. Serina, 17 SCRA 567; Phil. International Surety Co. Inc. v. Court of Tax Appeals, 19 SCRA 617; People v. Pineda, 20 SCRA 748-People v. Cortes, 20 SCRA 1228.

[27] Section 44(h) of the Judiciary Act of 1948.

[28] Section 4, Rule 65, Rules of Court.

[29] Director of Forestry v. King, 38 SCRA 559.

[30] Gayacao v. Hon. Executive Secretary, et al., 13 SCRA 763; Zamboanga General Utilities Inc. v. Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 20 SCRA 881; Macailing v. Andrada, 31 SCRA 126.

[31] 22 SCRA 1186.

[32] Gayacao v. Hon. Executive Secretary, et al., 13 SCRA 753; Zamboanga General Utilities Inc. vs. Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 20 SCRA 881; Macailing, et al. vs. Andrada, et al., 31 SCRA 126.

[33] 38 SCRA 559.

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