

DAMASO S. FLORES, COMPLAINANT, VS. HON. BERNARDO P. ABESAMIS, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, BRANCH 85, QUEZON CITY (NOW DEPUTY COURT ADMINISTRATOR), RESPONDENT. IN RE: CONTEMPT PROCEEDI...

A.M. No. SC-96-1. July 10, 1997

Ponente: NARVASA, C.J.

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NARVASA, C.J.:

This is a resolution treats of the liability of Damaso S. Flores for contempt of court in relation to several actions and proceedings in which he was a party.

Flores was the defendant in Civil Case No. Q-45825 of the Regional Trial Court of Quezon city (Branch 85). The case involved an admitted indebtedness of Flores to the plaintiff, Rolando Ligon, of about 1.8 million pesos. A judgment based on compromise was rendered on September 26, 1985 by the late Judge Jose Castro, providing for payment of the debt in stated installments and, in the event of default, acceleration of the obligation and the surrender of the “Paranaque Cockpit Stadium” (held by Flores under lease) to Ligon for the latter to manage and operate.

On April 10, 1986, the Trial Court promulgated an order declaring Flores to have breached the compromise judgment and directing execution thereof; and on May 22, 1986, a writ of execution issued. Flores appealed the Order of April 10, 1986 to the Court of Appeals, his appeal being docketed as CA-G.R. CV No. 10259; and to nullify the writ of execution, he filed a certiorari action in the same Court, docketed as CA-G.R. SP No. 09061.

CA-G.R. SP No. 09061 was decided on September 19, 1986 in Flores’ favor -- vindicating his right to possess the cockpit on a finding that he had not infringed the compromise judgment. Ligon’s petition for review in the Supreme Court, G.R. No. 76039, was dismissed on February 23, 1987, and his motion for reconsideration denied on March 10, 1988.

Flores then asked the Trial Court to restore possession of the cockpit to him in light of this dispositions of the Court of Appeals and this Court. His motion to this effect, dated April 5, 1988, was granted by Judge Abesamis, but only on April 20, 1988, because the latter (a) had to wait for the mittimus, which was not received until April 13, 1988, and (b) had to study the pleadings filed by Ligon and Flores on the issue, dated April 14 and 15, 1988, respectively.

Despite Judge Abesamis’ Order of April 20, 1988 -- and two other orders of substantially the same tenor dated May 2, 1988 and August 31, 1988 in response to Flores’ motions dated June 9, 1988 and August 15, 1988 -- Flores was still unable to regain possession of the cockpit. This was due to Ligon’s actions in the Court of Appeals.

In that Court Ligon challenged the order of execution of April 20, 1988 by a special civil action of certiorari, CA-G.R. SP No. 14588, and obtained a temporary restraining order. CA-G.R. SP No. 14588 was consolidated

with CA-G.R. CV No. 10259. The cases were jointly decided on August 9, 1988 in Flores' favor; and Ligon's motion for reconsideration, denied on November 23, 1988. Ligon's appeal to this Court, G.R. No. 84644 again resulted in failure. His review was denied on August 29, 1989, and reconsideration denied on October 23, 1989.

It is noteworthy that in G.R. No. 84644, in an attempt to obtain a favorable verdict, Ligon drew attention to the fact that some years back he had purchased the Paranaque Cockpit Stadium from its owner (Flores' lessor) and argued that this gave him a right of possession superior of that of Flores. The Court however declined to take cognizance of the matter and observed -- in its Resolution of October 23, 1989 denying Ligon's motion for reconsideration was finality -- that "any supervening event should properly be addressed to the Trial Court, not to this Court."

Judge Abesamis received notice of the judgment of August 9, 1988 in the consolidated cases of CA-G.R. No. 14588 and CA-G.R. CV No. 10259 on August 16, 1988; and after considering the pleadings presented by the parties, the last being a rejoinder dated August 26, 1988, ordered issuance of an alias writ of execution on August 31, 1988, to revert possession of the cockpit to Flores.

But enforcement of the alias writ of execution was again effectively delayed by still other circumstances, to wit: (1) another temporary restraining order -- issued by the Court of Appeals on October 27, 1988 in CA-G.R. SP No. 14588 above mentioned -- which was not lifted until November 23, 1988; (2) a temporary restraining order issued on December 5, 1988 by the Second Division of the Supreme Court in G.R. No. 84644, not lifted until October, 1989; and (3) the pendency in Civil Case No. Q-45825 itself of the matter of the appointment of a special sheriff sought by Flores precisely to carry out the writ.

Surprisingly -- although aware of these circumstances precluding enforcement of Judge Abesamis' order for reversion of the cockpit to him -- Flores filed criminal and administrative cases against said Judge, accusing him of partiality, evident bad faith, and gross negligence, as well as of serious misconduct, inefficiency and ignorance of the law, in deliberately delaying actions on his motion to obtain possession of the cockpit. These cases were:

- (a) Criminal Case No. OMB-0-89-01209 filed on May 22, 1989 in the Office of the Ombudsman;
- (b) A.M. No. 90-11-332-SBA, the "administrative aspect" of Case No. OMB 0-89-01209, supra, of which this Court took cognizance; and
- (c) A.M. No. RTJ-89-348, filed with this Court on June 27, 1989.

OMB Case No. 0-89-01209 was short-lived. It was dismissed by the Office of the Ombudsman on September 13, 1989 "for lack of merit and insufficiency of evidence" upon a finding that Judge Abesamis had acted promptly and properly on Flores' motions. Indeed, upon the facts just recited, it was legally impossible to ascribe inaction or intent to delay to His Honor as regards Flores' attempts to regain possession of the cockpit.

Now, on November 20, 1989 -- after Ligon's motion for reconsideration of the judgment in G.R. No. 84644 was denied with finality in the Resolution of October 23, 1989 -- Abesamis authorized the issuance of still another writ of execution in Flores' favor. But again Ligon challenged this writ in yet another special civil action in the Court of Appeals, CA-G.R. SP No. 19348. The case was decided adversely to him on January 22, 1990.

Once more, Flores asked the Regional Trial Court to restore possession of the cockpit to him, and once more Ligon opposed to him, this time asserting that such restoration was no longer legally possible because barred by a "supervening event" -- which, according to this Court's Resolution of October 23, 1989 in G.R. No. 84644, "should properly be addressed to the Trial Court, not to this Court," supra. Ligon pointed out that since he had become the owner of the cockpit, his right of possession must be deemed superior to that of Flores, lessee of the former owner.

After hearing the parties, Judge Abesamis sustained Ligon's contention, in an Order dated February 16, 1990. That Order was later upheld by Judge Teodoro Regino, Abesamis "pair judge," who acted on a subsequent motion of Flores to get back the cockpit while Abesamis was on leave. In his Order of April 16, 1990, Judge Regino ruled that Ligon's lawful acquisition of title to the cockpit and Flores' continuing failure to pay his debt of about P1.8 million to the former were supervening events warranting Ligon's retention of the cockpit and precluding its restoration to Flores. Flores' filed a motion for reconsideration, which was acted on by Judge Abesamis who had by then returned to duty. The motion was denied by Order of June 6, 1990.

Flores challenged these three (3) orders -- of February 16, 1990 (of Abesamis), of April 16, 1990 (of Regino) and of June 6, 1990 (of Abesamis) -- in a certiorari suit filed with the Court of Appeals, docketed as CA-G.R. SP No. 22201.

He also initiated on May 14, 1990, an administrative proceeding against Judge Teodoro Regino, docketed as A.M. No. RTJ-90-505, in relation to his Order dated April 16, 1990, *supra*.

The Court of Appeals, however, found no merit in Flores' certiorari action (CA-G.R. SP No. 22201), and in a Decision promulgated on October 31, 1990 (shortly after the action's commencement), dismissed the same. It later denied reconsideration thereof, by Resolution dated February 26, 1991. Flores' appeal to this Court, docketed as G.R. No. 97556, also failed.

Also dismissed by this Court for lack of merit, about two and a half years later, were the administrative case against Judge Regino (A.M. No. RTJ-90-505) as well as those against Judge Abesamis (A.M. No. RTJ-90-11-332-SBA) and (A.M. No. RTJ-89-348). That Resolution of dismissal, dated September 14, 1993, reads as follows:

"**, Acting on the separate complaints filed by Damaso Flores in (a) A.M. No. RTJ-89-348 charging respondent Judge Bernardo P. Abesamis with serious misconduct, inefficiency and gross ignorance of the law relative to Civil Case No. Q-45825, entitled 'Rolando R. Ligon vs. Damaso S. Flores' as well as the respondent's comment thereon dated May 7, 1990 and the complainant's reply (there)to **; and (b) A.M. No. RTJ-90-505 charging respondent Judge Teodoro P. Regino (who took over as pairing judge when Judge Abesamis was on sick leave) with serious misconduct, inefficiency and gross ignorance of the law for having issued in Civil Case No. Q-45825 his order of April 16, 1990 which, according to the complainant, unlawfully interpreted the final judgment he was supposed to enforce, and in doing so, he callously arrogated unto himself the power to reverse and said aside the said final judgments and rendered the same useless and nugatory as well as the respondent's reply/memorandum dated November 14, 1990 filed in compliance with the Resolution of the July 16, 1990, the Court resolved to DISMISS all the charges against respondent Judge Bernardo P. Abesamis in A.M. no. RTJ-89-348 for lack of merit. Similarly, considering that the extensive discussion made by respondent Judge Teodoro P. Regino in A.M. No. RTJ-90-505 in his order of April 16, 1990 of the pertinent facts and law involved is utterly inconsistent with the truth of the charges levelled at him, all the charges against Judge Teodoro P. Regino in A.M. No. RTJ-90-505 are hereby likewise DISMISSED.

Further, the Court Resolved to DISMISS, for lack of merit, the charges against Judge Abesamis in the administrative aspect of OMB Case No. 0-89-01209, entitled 'Damaso S. Flores vs. Hon. Bernardo P. Abesamis' in A.M. No. 90-11-332-SB, considering that the charges therein are fundamentally similar and are based on the facts and incidents as in A.M. No. RTJ-89-348."

But two years after promulgation of this Resolution of September 13, 1993, or more precisely on December 21, 1995, Damaso Flores once more filed in the Office of the Ombudsman a complaint against Judge Abesamis, with respect to his Orders of February 16, June 6, and December 10, 1990. Specifically, he accused Judge Abesamis of transgressing Section (e) of R.A. 3019 (the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act): "for alleged bias and prejudice

in granting a party's motion which caused undue injury to complainant."

The case was docketed as CPL No. 95-3618, and was referred by Assistant Ombudsman Abelardo L. Aportadera, Jr. on February 27, 1996 to the Office of the Court Administrator, where it was docketed as A.M. No. SC-96-1. The case was dismissed "for utter lack of merit" in this Court's Decision of December 23, 1996. The decision also ordered Flores -

*** to EXPLAIN within ten (10) days from notice hereof why ** he should not be disciplinarily dealt with for wilful disregard of this Court's judgment and orders and those of the Court of Appeals; abuse of the processes of the courts; and forum-shopping."

Flores submitted his explanation, denominated "Compliance," under date of January 14, 1997. In it he reviews in some detail the relevant facts and "submits that in filing all the cases, whether civil or administrative, he did not wilfully disregard the judgments and orders of this ** Court and those of the Court of Appeals, ** has not abused the courts' processes nor engaged in forum-shopping, ** (having filed said cases in the firm belief) that they were meritorious and not intended for delay or to harass anyone or to abuse the court's processes**," and with "a pure motive and that was to obtain justice -- to get what was due to him**."

It is in light of the material facts narrated herein (and in the Decision of December 23, 1996), in relation to Flores' aforesaid explanation (Compliance) of January 14, 1997, that the Court now addresses the matter of Flores' liability for disciplinary sanction.

1. His first complaints against Judge Abesamis in the OMB and this court were clearly without basis whatever and not susceptible of exculpatory explanation.

The common theory under which he sought to hold Judge Abesamis administratively and criminally responsible -- in Case OMB 0-89-01209 (filed on May 22, 1989), A.M. No. 90-11-332-SB (the "administrative aspect" of OMB 0-89-01209) and A.M. No. RTJ-89-348 -- was that His Honor had unduly delayed action on several motions filed by him to regain possession of the Paranaque Cockpit Stadium in accordance with the Decision of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. No. 09061 dated September 19, 1986, affirmed by this Court's Resolution of February 23, 1987 in G.R. No. 76039, reconsideration being thereafter denied on March 10, 1988. The motions were allegedly those dated April 5, 1988, June 9, 1988, August 15, 1988, October 14, 1988, and November 24, 1988.

But, as already stated, since Judge Abesamis received the mittimus from the Court of Appeals only on April 13, 1988, he could not have acted earlier on Flores' motion of April 5. Moreover, he had to study the pleadings exchanged by Ligon and Flores himself on the issue (dated April 14, and 15, 1988, respectively). Five days afterwards, or on April 20, 1988, he granted the latter's motion for execution. In other words, he acted on the incident within five (5) days after it could be properly regarded as submitted for resolution.

The trouble is, above related, Flores' adversary, Ligon, lost no time in challenging Judge Abesamis' order of execution of April 20, 1988, and other orders for restoration of possession of the cockpit to Flores, in a series of actions in the Court of Appeals and in this Court, in the course of which temporary restraining orders were issued against Abesamis. It was not until October 23, 1989, when Ligon's motion for reconsideration was denied with finality in G.R. No. 84644, that the judicial restraints on Judge Abesamis were finally removed. Under the facts, to repeat, it is not possible fairly to ascribe inaction or intent to delay to His Honor as regards Flores' motion for execution.

It was precisely in light of these circumstances, among others, that the Office of the Ombudsman quickly threw out Flores' complaint against Judge Abesamis. That Office found that -

*** (contrary to Flores' claims) practically all of ** (his motions) before ** (Abesamis') sala have been

favorably acted upon by the latter and with dispatch excepting those cases only where a directive had been received from the Court of Appeals ordering ** (him) to desist from restoring possession of subject cockpit to herein complainant until further orders ** or in cases where Ligon ** filed his Opposition to ** (Flores' motions) and the latter filed his Answer/Comment thereto."

And it was for the same reasons that this Court, on September 14, 1993, dismissed the administrative cases against Judge Abesamis -- A.M. No. RTJ-89-348 and A.M. No. 90-11-332-SB, as well as that filed by Flores against Judge Teodoro Regino, Abesamis' "pair judge."

2. Also patently without foundation in fact and incapable of tenable explanation, is the case filed by Flores on December 21, 1995 against Judge Abesamis in the Office of the Ombudsman -- CPL No. 95-3618 (A.M. No. SC-96-1) "for alleged bias and prejudice" attendant upon the Orders of February 16, June 6, and December 10, 1990. For on December 21, 1995, Flores was fully aware of the following material events indubitably demonstrating the absence of any cause for complaint on his part

a. Judge Regino's Order dated April 16, 1990 had been upheld in no uncertain terms by this Court's Resolution of September 14, 1993 (A.M. No. RTJ-90-505) which declared that "the pertinent facts and law involved were utterly inconsistent with the truth of the charges levelled at him." The ruling is implicit but no less clear affirmation of the correctness of two Orders of Judge Abesamis" (1) that of February 16, 1990 -- which Judge Regino sustained in his aforesaid Order of April 16, 1990 -- and (2) that of June 6, 1990 -- which denied reconsideration of Judge Regino's order of April 16, 1990.

b. Indeed, he (Flores) had directly assailed (a) Judge Abesamis' Order of February 16, 1990, (b) Judge Regino's Order of April 16, 1990 confirming said Order, and (c) Judge Abesamis Order of June 6, 1990, denying Flores' motion for reconsideration of Regino's Order of April 16, 1990, in a certiorari action in the Court of Appeals (CA-G.R. SP No. 22201), and said Court had confirmed the correctness of all three orders, in its decision dated October 31, 1990. The Appellate Court then denied reconsideration, by Resolution of February 26, 1991; and Flores' appeal to this Court, docketed as G.R. No. 97556, was dismissed for lack of merit.

c. So, too, Flores' challenges to two other Orders of Judge Abesamis -- of June 25, 1990 (denying Flores' motion for his inhibition) and of December 10, 1990 (decreeing execution in favor of Ligon after Flores refused to present countervailing evidence on the matter) -- were decided adversely to him by the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. SP No. 22881 (motion for reconsideration of decision denied on August 12, 1991). (N.B. Later, said orders were also sustained by this Court's First Division in G.R. No. 101152, decided jointly with G.R. No. 97556 on July 29, 1996).

It is clear, in other words, that when Flores initiated CPL No. 95-3618 (A.M. No. SC-96-1), he knew that the specific Orders of Judge Abesamis upon which his criminal complaint was grounded had already been sustained by higher courts, and consequently, his complaint was completely devoid of merit.

3. Even assuming *arguendo* that there was reasonable ground on belief of Flores' part that Judge Abesamis was refraining from acting on his motions, out of bias or hostility or other improper motive, there were obvious judicial remedies readily available to him to obtain relief -- the existence and availability of which precluded his resort to criminal, civil or administrative proceedings against the Judge.

As everyone knows, the law provides ample judicial remedies against errors or irregularities being committed by a Trial Court in the exercise of its jurisdiction. The ordinary remedies against errors or irregularities which may be regarded as normal in nature (i.e., error in appreciation or admission of evidence, or in construction or application of procedural or substantive law or legal principle) include a motion for reconsideration (or after rendition of a judgment or final order, a motion for new trial), and appeal. The extraordinary remedies against errors or

irregularities which may be deemed extraordinary in character (i.e., whimsical, capricious, despotic exercise of power or neglect of duty, etc.) are inter alia the special civil actions of certiorari, prohibition or mandamus, or a motion for inhibition, a petition for change of venue, as the case may be.

Now, the established doctrine and policy is that disciplinary proceedings and criminal actions against Judges are not complementary or suppletory of, nor a substitute for these judicial remedies, whether ordinary or extraordinary. Resort to and exhaustion of these judicial remedies, as well as the entry of judgment in the corresponding action or proceeding, are pre-requisites for the taking of other measures against the persons of the judges concerned, whether of civil, administrative, or criminal nature. It is only after the available judicial remedies have been exhausted and the appellate tribunals have spoken with finality, that the door to an inquiry into his criminal, civil, or administrative liability may be said to have opened, or closed.

Flores resorted to administrative prosecution (or institution of criminal actions) as a substitute for or supplement to the specific modes of appeal or review provided by law from court judgments or orders, on the theory that the Judges' orders had caused him "undue injury." This is impermissible, as this Court has already more than once ruled. Law and logic decree that "administrative or criminal remedies are neither alternative nor cumulative to judicial review where such review is available, and must wait on the result thereof" (SEE In Re: Wenceslao Laureta, 148 SCRA 382, 417-418 [1987]; In Re: Joaquin T. Borromeo, 241 SCRA 405 [1995]. Indeed, since judges must be free to judge, without pressure or influence from external forces or factors, they should not be subject to intimidation, the fear of civil, criminal or administrative sanctions for acts they may do and dispositions they may make in the performance of their duties and functions; and it is sound rule, which must be recognized independently of statute, that judges are not generally liable for acts done within the scope of their jurisdiction and in good faith; and that exceptionally, prosecution of the judge can be had only if "there be a final declaration by a competent court in some appropriate proceeding of the manifestly unjust character of the challenged judgment or order, and ** also evidence of malice or bad faith, ignorance of inexcusable negligence, on the part of the judge in rendering said judgment or order" or under the stringent circumstances set out in Article 32 of the Civil Code (SEE In Re: Joaquin T. Borromeo, at pp. 464-465).

Flores thus abused the processes of the court. He resorted in 1989 and 1990 to the administrative procedure for disciplining Judges prescribed by law, and even to criminal prosecution, notwithstanding that determination of the correctness of the orders of Judges Abesamis and Regino -- upon which the viability of his recourse depended -- had not yet been done by the Court of Appeals or this Court before which said orders when then pending review. For obviously, until and unless there was an authoritative pronouncement that those orders were indeed tainted by anomaly, as was his contention, there was no ground whatever to prosecute Judge Abesamis or Regino, either administratively or criminally, for rendering them. In fine, Flores filed his administrative and criminal complaints prematurely, before ascertainment of the existence of the foundation therefor; and it would appear that improper motives underlay the filing of his complaints: either to vent his wrath against someone, anyone, because of his frustrations in his attempts to regain possession of the cockpit, or to so intimidate the respondent Judges as to make them more malleable in their subsequent actuations with respect to his future motions.

What is worse is that after his administrative and criminal accusations filed in 1989 and 1990, as well as his judicial assaults against particular orders of Judge Abesamis, had been thrown out for lack of merit, Flores again filed on December 21, 1995 charges involving same matters against Deputy Court Administrator Abesamis, in the Office of the Ombudsman where it was docketed as CPL No. 95-3618. As above stated, this complaint was later made the basis of another administrative proceeding in this Court, identified as A.M. No. SC-96-1, which Flores actively prosecuted. He thereby manifested what can only be considered an insolent disregard of this Court's adjudgments. Knowing that his earlier accusations and theories had already been ruled by this Court to be without

merit and accordingly rejected, he resort to re-ventilate the same theories and accusation two years later, completely ignoring, and demonstrating disdain for, this Court's resolutions thereon.

Not only was the complaint he filed utterly without merit, as very well knew; in filing it he also utilized the administrative disciplinary procedure provided by law for his own purposes. His motives must again be as suspect, as those attendant upon his earlier accusations.

Finally, his initiation of the complaint was forum-shopping of the most blatant sort, a clear attempt to re-ventilate or re-litigate issues already passed upon and definitively resolved by this Court, affirming action on the same issues by the Court of Appeals and the Regional Trial Court.

In fine, Flores is more than preponderantly shown by the evidence to have, more than once: (a) instituted criminal as well as administrative proceedings against Judge Abesamis (and Judge Regino) which he knew to be completely without basis in fact; (2) resorted to administrative and criminal prosecution contemporaneously with, and prior to exhaustion of, judicial remedies against the acts complained of; and (3) engaged in forum-shopping. He is guilty of abuse of the process or proceedings of the courts, and of improper conduct tending to obstruct or degrade the administration of justice (Section 3, Rule 71 of the Rules of Court).

It would appear that Flores cannot accept the fact that the earlier judgments and orders rendered in his favor by this Court and others in several actions have already been superseded and rendered *functus officio* by later verdicts, in light of supervening events. Notwithstanding the pronouncements in said later verdicts which have since become final and executory, not to mention his long unpaid debt to Ligon, he remains inordinately obsessed with the prior adjudgments, insisting they have not been superseded and continually referring to them in his motions and pleadings as a source of right, even after their supersession; in fact, with no little obduracy, he has quite recently adverted to them again -- in substantiation of his claim of unjust deprivation of the cockpit in question -- in (1) a tract entitled "Appeal for Justice Only for the Purpose of Securing Justice and Not To Malign or Smear Any One," which he has caused to be printed and distributed, as well as in (2) a pleading entitled "Petitioner's Appeal for Justice," filed without authority under date of April 18, 1997. It may well be that he felt and still feels sorely aggrieved by the procedural maneuvers of his adversary, Ligon, who thereby succeeded in not only delaying but eventually preventing execution of the previous orders of the Regional Trial Court of Quezon City, the Court of Appeals and this Court, and which maneuvers, it may be mentioned, were denounced in no certain terms as repetitious and dilatory, by the Court of Appeals. But those feelings of resentment and frustration engendered by Ligon's maneuvers cannot justify the oppressive acts perpetrated against completely blameless Judges, and for which he (Flores) is himself made responsible in the contempt proceeding at bar.

WHEREFORE, Damaso S. Flores is DECLARED GUILTY of contempt of court and SENTENCED to pay a FINE OF ONE THOUSAND PESOS (P1,000.00).

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Padilla, Regalado, Davide, Jr., Romero, Bellosillo, Vitug, Mendoza, Francisco, Panganiban, Hermosisima, Jr. and Torres, JJ., concur.

Melo, J., no part due to participation in previous cases in the Court of Appeals.

Puno, J., no part due to relationship.

Kapunan, J., on leave.

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