

JOANA GILDA L. LEYRIT, ASUNCION ESPINOSA, MARY ANN LASPIÑAS, NATIVIDAD SULLIVAN, ELENA MOLARTE SOLAS, JULIE FELARCA AND RENE F. GANZON, COMPLAINANTS, VS. NICOLASITO S. SOLAS, CL...

A.M. No. P-08-2567 (Formerly OCA I.P.I. No. 99-670-P). October 30, 2009

Ponente: CHICO-NAZARIO, J.

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CHICO-NAZARIO, J.:

Before the Court are administrative matters that arose from two administrative complaints filed by several employees of the Office of the Clerk of Court (OCC), Municipal Trial Court in Cities (MTCC), Iloilo City, against Nicolasito S. Solas, Clerk of Court of the said trial court.

The Complaint, docketed as A.M. No. P-08-2567 (OCA IPI No. 99-670-P),[1] was filed by complainants Joanna Gilda Leyrit (Leyrit), Asuncion Espinosa (Espinosa), Mary Ann Laspiñas (Laspiñas), Natividad Sullivan (Sullivan), Elena Molarte Solas (Molarte Solas), Julie Felarca (Felarca), and Rene F. Ganzon (Ganzon) seeking to have respondent held administratively liable for Dishonesty, Discourtesy in the Course of Official Duties, Willful Violation of Office Regulations, and Violation of Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act.

The Complaint, docketed as A.M. P-08-2568 (OCA IPI No. 99-753-P) was filed by the same complainants in A.M. No. P-08-2567 and was further joined by Mrs. Ma. Theresa G. Zerrudo (Mrs. Zerrudo), Salvacion Sermonia (Sermonia), Maricar A. Larroza (Larroza), Emma de la Cruz (De la Cruz), Salvacion Villanueva (Villanueva), and Noena Daquero (Daquero), charging respondent with harassment, abuse of authority, grave misconduct, conduct unbecoming a public official, graft and corruption, oppression, and nepotism.[2]

Complainants made the following allegations against respondent in their two Complaints:

1. Respondent had notarized documents and administrative oaths not related to his official functions, and charged notarial fees for the same.
2. Respondent pretended to be a lawyer even though he was not, and never corrected persons addressing him as "attorney."
3. Respondent acted arrogantly as Clerk of Court, Chief of Office, and Ex-Officio Sheriff, requiring the OCC-MTCC personnel to obey him (respondent) even if he was wrong. He humiliated and shouted vindictive words at complainants in the presence of other people. At one instance, respondent insulted complainant Leyrit in the presence of many people inside the office by uttering the following words: "Daw si bilat-bilat ka guid, maisog, daw ilupot mo ako sa bulsa mo." (As if you are already somebody. You are brave as if you will insert me into your pocket.) Respondent likewise embarrassed complainant Mrs. Zerrudo by posting a notice in the MTCC premises enjoining the public not to transact official business with the latter because of her detail to another court.
4. Respondent controlled the local and national funds for office supplies, and disposed of them without consulting

the MTCC judges. In fact, respondent acquired a computer worth P70,000.00 using local funds without the approval of the Executive Judge. The said computer was being used exclusively by respondent's five favored locally funded employees, detailed to the OCC-MTCC, who brought their small children to play with it. In addition, respondent did not share office supplies with complainants. Hence, complainants were forced to provide their own office supplies or borrow from other courts.

Whenever respondent was out of the office, requests for office supplies had to be coursed through the five favored local employees, who were not assigned specific office functions, but were being utilized by respondent for his personal needs. These five favored local employees loitered during office hours and did not declare their tardiness and absences in their daily time records. In contrast, respondent immediately made reports to the Executive Judge about, and/or issued memoranda to, the regular OCC-MTCC employees who went out of the office during office hours.

5. Respondent allowed his personal lawyer, Atty. Virgilia Carmen Dioquino (Atty. Dioquino), to hold office at the OCC-MTCC and to utilize office computers and supplies, as well as the services of local employees as typing clerks. Atty. Dioquino prepared baseless administrative complaints, which respondent filed against judges and employees of the MTCC, thus, demoralizing those concerned.

6. Respondent established connections with lending institutions and banks and acted as the collector whenever such lending institutions and banks filed cases in court. He further attended the weekly raffle of cases, so he could get a list of raffled cases, which he distributed to banks and lending institutions in exchange for monthly honoraria. When complainants confronted respondent regarding this matter, respondent filed administrative cases against them.

7. Respondent ordered security guards Valentino Alonsagay and Ricardo Besen to monitor and report complainants' activities.

8. Lastly, respondent exposed to the public, through radio and newsprint, all misunderstandings and differences between the local employees detailed to the OCC-MTCC and the regular OCC-MTCC employees.

In his separate Comments[3] on the aforementioned Complaints, respondent proffered the following defenses:

1. Although he did notarize documents that were not related to his official functions, respondent maintained that he had erroneously thought that some subscriptions or oaths were jurats. Anyway, he had already talked to the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) and Executive Judge Severino C. Aguilar of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 35, Iloilo City, about the matter.

2. There were some people who addressed respondent as "attorney," assuming that he was one because of his position as Clerk of Court. Respondent contended that although he was not a bar passer, he was a graduate of law and, thus, there was no necessity to correct people who addressed him as "attorney," especially in communications addressed to his position.

3. According to respondent, there was peace, harmony, and respect among the OCC-MTCC employees until Mrs. Ma. Theresa G. Zerrudo (Mrs. Zerrudo), Clerk of Court III, was transferred to the said office. Soon after, complainant Mrs. Zerrudo instigated misunderstandings and intrigues among the employees, particularly between the local employees detailed at the OCC-MTCC and the regular OCC-MTCC employees.

Since complainant Mrs. Zerrudo was instrumental in the employment of complainants Leyrit, Espinosa, Laspiñas, Sullivan, and Felarca at the OCC-MTCC, the said five complainants owed their loyalty to her. Meanwhile, respondent's own daughter-in-law, complainant Molarte Solas, began to dislike and disrespect him because, for

ethical reasons, he refused to recommend her for promotion.

Complainants defied, disobeyed, and refused to recognize respondent as the head of office and, instead, followed orders from complainant Mrs. Zerrudo's husband, Judge Zerrudo. Whenever respondent corrected errors committed by complainants in the performance of their duties, complainants would fight back and show their disrespect for and defiance of him, even in public. Complainants Leyrit and Molarte Solas, criminal and civil clerks-in-charge, respectively, went as far as depriving respondent access to the docket books by keeping and locking the said books inside Mrs. Zerrudo's office cubicle.

Respondent also narrated that on 7 June 1999, then Chief Justice Hilario G. Davide detailed complainant Mrs. Zerrudo to the OCC of the RTC, Iloilo City, but despite said detail order, she continued to report for work and stay in her cubicle at the OCC-MTCC. This prompted Jose Bryan Hilary P. Davide, Staff Head of the Chief Justice, to issue an order directing her to strictly comply with the detail order. Suspecting that respondent was behind the moves against her, complainant Mrs. Zerrudo gathered the other complainants and filed the instant Complaints against respondent to get even with him.

4. Respondent was not controlling the office supplies. He had to keep his office closed, because it was where he kept the daily collections, receipts, and confidential documents of the court. Also, complainants should not have made a big deal about his computer from the city government. The city government gave a computer not only to respondent, but also to complainant Mrs. Zerrudo.

5. Atty. Dioquino was not holding office in the OCC-MTCC and using office computers and supplies, as she had her own office at her residence. Atty. Dioquino only dropped by the OCC-MTCC occasionally to greet respondent. The latter did admit that Atty. Dioquino was his counsel of record in the criminal and administrative cases he filed against Mrs. Zerrudo and Salvacion Sermonia, but averred that he prepared his own complaints and submitted them to Atty. Dioquino for correction and finalization.

6. Complainants' allegations on respondent's purported connections with lending institutions and banks were baseless and unsupported by evidence. Respondent attended the raffle of cases to ensure that complainant Leyrit, a member of the Raffle Committee, who had multiple cases of Violation of Batas Pambansa Blg. 22, would not be able to manipulate the conduct of raffle.

7. Lastly, respondent commissioned security guards to his office because of the incident that transpired sometime in January 1996. A court employee, Salvacion Sermonia of MTCC Iloilo City, loyal to complainant Mrs. Zerrudo, physically attacked and assaulted respondent with a knife inside his office during office hours. The incident resulted in the filing of cases, two criminal and one administrative, which were eventually settled.

Respondent maintained that the Complaints were merely counter-charges against him because of the administrative cases he filed against complainants Leyrit and Mrs. Zerrudo, and the latter's husband, Judge Alexis A. Zerrudo (Judge Zerrudo).

After consolidation of A.M. No. P-08-2567 (OCA IPI No. 99-670-P) and OCA IPI No. 99-753-P (A.M. P-08-2568), the cases were assigned to Executive Judge Roger B. Patricio (Investigating Judge) of the RTC, Branch 36, Iloilo City, for investigation.

The parties opted not to be assisted by their counsel during the investigation.

While the investigation of the administrative cases against him was pending, respondent opted to avail himself of early retirement on 10 September 2007.

After hearing the testimonies of the parties and their witnesses, the Investigating Judge, in his Report[4] dated 7

April 2008, came to the conclusion that of all the allegations made against respondent, the latter actually committed only the following acts:

- Failing to conduct himself with propriety, moral righteousness and decorum by scolding, embarrassing, and for being abrasive to his subordinates, particularly the complainants all of which should not have been done as the Clerk of Court and the Chief of Office of the Clerk of Court of MTCC, Iloilo City; and
- As testified by Mercedes D. Nava, respondent ratified documents without being authorized bylaw to do so, for which he was paid of (sic) notarial fees which he appropriated for his own personal use without accounting them for the government.[5]

The Investigating Judge recommended that as penalty, respondent's salaries equivalent to six months be forfeited in favor of the government and deducted from respondent's retirement benefits, thus:

Finding sufficient evidence against respondent Nicolasito S. Solas, Clerk of Court, MTCC, Iloilo City in OCA I.P.I. No. 99-670-P entitled "Joana Gilda L. Leyrit, et al. vs. Nicolasito S. Solas and OCA I.P.I. No. 99-753-P entitled "Ma. Theresa G. Zerrudo, et al. vs. Nicolasito S. Solas, it is respectfully recommended that his salaries equivalent to six (6) months be forfeited in favor of the government and deducted from his retirement benefits as Clerk of Court, MTCC, Iloilo.[6]

The Court referred the Investigating Judge's Report to the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) for evaluation, report, and recommendation.

On 8 September 2008, the OCA submitted its Report[7] with the following recommendations:

PREMISES CONSIDERED, it is respectfully recommended to the Honorable Court that:

- a. That the instant complaints be REDOCKETED as a regular administrative complaint against respondent Nicolasito S. Solas, Clerk of Court, MTCC, Iloilo City; and
- b. Respondent be held GUILTY of simple misconduct for his failure to conduct himself with propriety, moral righteousness and decorum in his dealings with his subordinates and a FINE equivalent to Three (3) months salary be forfeited in favor of the government and deducted from his retirement benefits.

The Court then required the parties to manifest within ten days from notice if they were willing to submit the matter for resolution based on the pleadings filed.[8] Complainants and respondent failed to file their manifestations despite notice sent to and received by them. Resultantly, the cases were submitted for decision based on the pleadings filed.

The Court agrees in the findings of the OCA.

Unauthorized notarization of documents

There is no doubt that respondent notarized and administered oaths in documents that had no relation to his official function. Documentary evidence submitted by complainants show that respondent notarized sworn applications for Mayor's and business permits, affidavits, and other documents, in his capacity as MTCC Clerk of Court. He charged fees for his notarial services, but did not render an accounting of said fees as part of the collection of the MTCC.

Under Section 21 of the Administrative Code of 1917, only the Clerk of Court of the Supreme Court and Clerks of Court of the First Instance (now RTC) were granted the general authority to administer oaths. Section 41 of the Administrative Code of 1987, as amended by Republic Act No. 6733,[9] now provides:

Sec. 41. Officers Authorized to Administer Oath. - The following officers have general authority to administer

oaths: President; Vice-President; Members and Secretaries of both Houses of the Congress; Members of the Judiciary; Secretaries of Departments; Provincial governors and lieutenant-governors; city mayors; municipal mayors; bureau directors; regional directors; clerks of court; registrars of deeds; other civilian officers in public service of the government of the Philippines whose appointments are vested in the President and are subject to confirmation by the Commission on Appointments; all other constitutional officers; and notaries public.

From the abovequoted provision, the term "clerks of court" is used as a general term. No specification was made as to the court to which said clerks of court belonged. The intention of the law is clear -- to remove the limitation, and hence, to authorize all clerks of court regardless of whether they are clerks of court of the Metropolitan Trial Courts, Municipal Trial Courts or Municipal Circuit Trial Courts, to administer oaths on matters involving official business.[10]

Clerks of court are notaries public ex officio and, thus, may notarize documents or administer oaths, but only when the matter is related to the exercise of their official functions. Clerks of court should not in their ex-officio capacity take part in the execution of private documents bearing no relation at all to their official functions. The Court takes judicial notice of the fact that Iloilo City is a highly urbanized city and obviously not a far-flung municipality, which has neither lawyers nor notaries public to possibly warrant herein an exception to the general rule.[11]

It is clear from the above law that respondent had no authority to notarize sworn applications for Mayor's and business permits, affidavits, and other private or commercial documents, which had no relation to his office as MTCC Clerk of Court, and to accept fees for such services. Respondent himself asserts that he is a law graduate; hence, he cannot feign ignorance of the law and the limits of his authority as notary public ex officio.

Even respondent's defense that he had subscribed to oaths, mistaking them as jurats, deserves scant credit. Rule II of the Rules on Notarial Practice describes both acts as follows:

SEC. 2. Affirmation or Oath. - The term "Affirmation" or "Oath" refers to an act in which an individual on a single occasion:

- (a) appears in person before the notary public;
- (b) is personally known to the notary public or identified by the notary public through competent evidence of identity as defined by these Rules; and
- (c) avows under penalty of law to the whole truth of the contents of the instrument or document.

SEC. 6. Jurat. - "Jurat" refers to an act in which an individual on a single occasion:

- (a) appears in person before the notary public and presents an instrument or document;
- (b) is personally known to the notary public or identified by the notary public through competent evidence of identity as defined by these Rules;
- (c) signs the instrument or document in the presence of the notary; and
- (d) takes an oath or affirmation before the notary public as to such instrument or document.

A notarized document includes one that is subscribed and sworn to under oath, or one that contains a jurat.[12] It does not matter whether respondent thought he was subscribing to an oath or a jurat, because in either case, he was deemed to have notarized a document and rendered notarial services.

Respondent was guilty of abuse of authority, as well as of having violated Section 41 of the Administrative Code of 1987, as amended by Republic Act No. 6733.

It must be noted that then MTCC Executive Judge Jose R. Astorga had also filed on 5 July 1996 an administrative complaint against respondent for various irregularities in the latter's performance of his duties as Clerk of Court of the MTCC, Iloilo City, including notarizing private documents not related to his official functions. Executive Judge Astorga's administrative complaint was docketed as A.M. No. P-01-1484. On 17 July 2001, the Court rendered its Decision in A.M. No. P-01-1484 finding respondent guilty of abuse of authority and imposing upon him a fine of Five Thousand Pesos (P5,000.00) with a warning that a repetition of the same or a similar act in the future will be dealt with more severely.

Since the documents that respondent notarized in abuse of his authority as a notary public ex officio in A.M. No. P-01-1484 and the present administrative complaints appear to be the same, and respondent has already been penalized for such notarial services rendered in excess of his authority, the imposition of another penalty upon him for exactly the same charge is inappropriate, as it will constitute double penalty.

Acts unbecoming a court employee

It appears that respondent had no close personal relations with complainants, and that he had been suspicious and irritable when dealing with them professionally, thus, affecting the smooth and efficient discharge of functions in the OCC-MTCC.

Complainants testified, and respondent was unable to rebut, that he had shouted at and uttered vindictive words against them, and even humiliated them while they were doing their job and attending to the needs of the public. In his desperate attempt to exonerate himself, respondent could only impute malicious motive to complainants, averring that they merely had an axe to grind against him; and that they had defied, disobeyed, and refused to recognize him as head of the OCC-MTCC. Unfortunately for him, his explanations do not excuse his actions.

Respondent's acts are absolutely unbecoming a court employee who is expected to display proper decorum. In *Villaros v. Orpiano*,^[13] the Court stressed that "the behavior of all employees and officials involved in the administration of justice, from judges to the most junior clerks, is circumscribed with a heavy responsibility. Their conduct must be guided by strict propriety and decorum at all times in order to merit and maintain the public's respect for and trust in the judiciary."

High-strung and belligerent behavior has no place in government service, where the personnel are enjoined to act with self-restraint and civility at all times even when confronted with rudeness and insolence.^[14] More so is such conduct exacted from court employees, since they have to earn and keep the public's respect for and confidence in the judicial service.^[15] This standard of conduct must apply to the court employees' dealings not only with the public, but also with their co-workers. How can court employees be expected to treat members of the public, who are mostly complete strangers to them, with respect, restraint, and civility, when they cannot accord the same treatment to one another, whom they closely work with on a daily basis?

Agents of the law should refrain from the use of language that is abusive, offensive, scandalous, menacing, or otherwise improper. Judicial employees are expected to accord every due respect, not only to their superiors, but also to others and to their rights at all times. Their every act and word should be characterized by prudence, restraint, courtesy and dignity.^[16]

Failure to observe such standards of conduct would erode the dignity and honor of the courts or lay open to suspicion the official conduct of court personnel. It bears stressing that the image of a court of justice is mirrored by the conduct, official and otherwise, of its personnel who are all bound to adhere to the exacting standards of morality and decency in both their professional and private actuations. These norms, it should be kept in mind, are ever so essential in preserving the good name and integrity of the judiciary.^[17]

Respondent ought to be reminded that a clerk of court, as the administrative assistant of the presiding judge, is an important functionary of the judiciary. The administrative functions of a clerk of court are vital to the prompt and sound administration of justice.[18] The clerk of court should be a role model for other court employees to emulate in the performance of duties, as well as in the conduct and behavior, of a public servant. A clerk of court cannot err without affecting the integrity of the court or the efficient administration of justice.[19] A clerk of court should set the example for other court personnel in the observance of the standards of morality and decency, both in official and personal conduct.[20] As part of the administrative functions of a clerk of court, he/she is expected to foster harmony and cooperation in the office so as to ensure effective and efficient service to the public.

Evidently, respondent failed to observe proper decorum in his dealings with his subordinates and to serve as a model for the other court employees in his conduct and actions. Instead, he fomented discord, and led those under him to division by unequally and unfairly treating some of his subordinates, particularly the complainants, while favoring others. As expected, respondent's irritable and haughty behavior towards complainants affected the latter's performance of their duties, which, in turn, harmed the integrity of the entire OCC-MTCC.

While complainants may have indeed defied and disobeyed respondent, the latter should have taken the higher ground and resisted the urge to retaliate with similarly disrespectful behavior. Respondent would not gain the respect and obedience of his subordinates by merely demanding the same and wielding an iron hand in the office. There is no showing that respondent made any attempt to have a dialogue with complainants to address the dispute between them.

Clearly, with his acts, respondent utterly failed to live up to the norms of conduct demanded of his position as MTCC Clerk of Court, for which he should be held liable for simple misconduct. In *Office of the Court Administrator v. Judge Fernandez*, [21] the Court defined misconduct, on the part of a person concerned with the administration of justice, as any unlawful conduct prejudicial to the rights of parties or to the right determination of the cause. It generally means wrongful, improper, unlawful conduct motivated by a premeditated, obstinate or intentional purpose.

Under Section 52, B(2), Rule IV of the Revised Uniform Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service, [7] simple misconduct is punishable by suspension for one (1) month and one (1) day to six (6) months for the first offense, and dismissal for the second offense. Considering that respondent has compulsorily retired from the service last 10 September 2007, the penalty of suspension is no longer feasible. Thus, a fine equivalent to his three (3) months' salary is imposed, to be deducted from his retirement benefits.

The Court finds complainants' other charges against respondent unsubstantiated by the evidence on record. In administrative proceedings, the complainants have the burden of proving by substantial evidence the allegations in their complaint. Since complainants failed to discharge such burden as to their charges of dishonesty, willful violation of office regulations, violation of the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act, and nepotism, against respondent, said charges are dismissed.

WHEREFORE, respondent Nicolasito S. Solas is hereby found **LIABLE** for simple misconduct while serving as Clerk of Court of the Municipal Trial Court in Cities, Iloilo City, and is hereby ordered to pay a FINE equivalent to his **THREE (3) MONTHS' SALARY** to be deducted from his retirement benefits.

SO ORDERED.

Puno, [*] C.J., Quisumbing, [**] Carpio, (Chairperson), and Peralta, JJ., concur.

[*] Chief Justice Reynato S. Puno was designated to sit as additional member replacing Associate Justice Presbitero J. Velasco, Jr. per Raffle dated 22 July 2009.

[**] Per Special Order No. 755, dated 12 October 2009, signed by Chief Justice Reynato S. Puno, designating Associate Justice Leonardo A. Quisumbing to replace Associate Justice Antonio Eduardo B. Nachura, who is on official leave.

[1] Rollo, pp. 1-5.

[2] Id. at 2-11.

[3] Id. at 212-220, 221-240.

[4] Id. at 281-300.

[5] Id. at 298.

[6] Id. at 299.

[7] Id. at 305-312.

[8] Id. at 313.

[9] Approved on 25 July 1989.

[10] *Astorga v. Solas*, 413 Phil. 558, 562 (2001), citing the Resolution, dated 18 December 1990, of the Court En Banc on Administrative Matter No. 90-10-1498-MTC (Letter-query of Clerk of Court II Bonifacio D. Paguirigan, MTC, Aparri, Cagayan).

[11] Id. The Court, taking judicial notice of the fact that there are still municipalities that have neither lawyers nor notaries public, has allowed notaries public ex officio (such as Municipal Trial Court or Municipal Circuit Trial Court judges) in said municipalities to perform any act within the competency of a regular notary public, provided that: (1) all notarial fees charged be for the account of the Government and turned over to the municipal treasurer (*Lapena, Jr. v. Marcos*, 200 Phil. 69, 77 (1982); and (2) a certification be made in the notarized documents attesting to the lack of any lawyer or notary public in such municipality or circuit.

[12] *Testate Estate of the Late Alipio Abada v. Abaja*, 490 Phil. 671, 678 (2005).

[13] 459 Phil. 1, 6-7 (2003).

[14] *Policarpio v. Fortus*, A.M. No. P-95-1114, 18 September 1995, 248 SCRA 272, 275; *Flores v. Ganaden*, 158 Phil. 864, 866 (1974).

[15] *Tablate v. Tanjutco-Seechung*, A.M. No. 92-10-425-OMB, 15 July 1994, 234 SCRA 161, 167.

[16] *Judge Caguioa v. Flora*, 412 Phil. 426, 433 (2001).

[17] *Lauro v. Lauro*, 411 Phil. 12, 17 (2001).

[18] *Escanan v. Monterola II*, 404 Phil. 32, 39 (2001).

[19] *Becina v. Vivero*, A.M. No. P-04-1797, 25 March 2004, 426 SCRA 261, 265.

[20] *Uy v. Edilo*, 458 Phil. 296, 302-303 (2003).

[21] 480 Phil. 495, 500 (2004), citing *Yap v. Inopiquez, Jr.*, 451 Phil. 182, 194 (2003).

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