

GEORGE M. BOCANEGRA, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. ANTONIO CONEJOS, AND AGAINST ALL THOSE PERSONS CLAIMING RIGHTS UNDER HIM, DEFENDANTS-APPELLANTS.

Ponente: ANTONIO-VALENZUELA, J.

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ANTONIO-VALENZUELA, J.:

This is the appeal from the Decision dated 18 September 2012 (“assailed Decision”),[1] of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 8, Manila (“RTC”), in Civil Case No. 07-118468.

THE FACTS

The facts are as follows: on 14 December 2007, George Bocanegra (“plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra”) filed the Complaint[2] for recovery of possession of the portion of a parcel of land covered by Transfer Certificate of Title (“TCT”) No. 122452 (“subject property”) against Cindy Digal, and against all those persons claiming rights under Cindy Digal.

Antonio Conejos (“defendant-appellant Conejos”) filed the Urgent Motion to Intervene with Leave of Court with Motion to Dismiss,[3] with the attached Answer In Intervention,[4] and averred: defendant-appellant Conejos was the actual occupant of the subject property, being the owner of the furniture shop (under the name and style “Tagahanan Furniture”) operating on the subject property; defendant-appellant Conejos employed Cindy Digal as a saleslady in defendant-appellant Conejos’ furniture shop; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra committed forum-shopping because plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed a similar case for recovery of possession of the subject property (“Civil Case No. 07-118495”) against Regino Tagahanan, which case was pending before the RTC, Branch 52, Manila; the allegations in the Complaint in Civil Case No. 07-118495 were verbatim copies of the allegations in this Complaint (Civil Case No. 07-118468); the interests of defendant-appellant Conejos could be prejudiced should this case be decided in favor of the plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra.

The Urgent Motion to Intervene with Leave of Court with Motion to Dismiss prayed that the RTC allow defendant-appellant Conejos to intervene, and dismiss the Complaint on the grounds of forum-shopping and *litis pendentia*.

The RTC granted defendant-appellant Conejos’ Motion to Intervene,[5] and denied defendant-appellant Conejos’ Motion to Dismiss, after finding that plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra did not violate the rules against forum-shopping.[6]

Plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed the Motion to Declare the Defendants As In Default,[7] and prayed that both Cindy Digal and defendant-appellant Conejos be declared as in default for failure to file their answer within the reglementary period.

Meanwhile, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed the Motion with Leave to Admit the Attached Amended Complaint,[8] and prayed that the attached Amended Complaint be admitted in the interest of justice.

In the Amended Complaint, defendant-appellant Conejos and all those persons claiming rights under him,

replaced Cindy Digal and all those persons claiming rights under her, as defendants. The Amended Complaint averred: plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra was the absolute owner of the 1,000 square meter parcel of land described as Lot 1-B of the Subdivision Plan (LRC) Psd-230517, situated at Rizal Avenue Extension, Sta. Cruz, Manila, and covered by TCT No. 122452; defendant-appellant Conejos, and all those persons claiming rights under him, illegally occupied a portion of the parcel of land covered by TCT No. 122452, consisting of 65 square meters ("subject property"), through strategy and stealth, and without paying rent to the plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra discovered defendant-appellant Conejos' illegal occupancy when plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra's employees investigated and conducted an ocular inspection on the subject property; the proportionate assessed value of the area of the subject property illegally occupied by defendant-appellant Conejos was Php397,800.00; the reasonable compensation for the use and occupancy of the subject property occupied by defendant-appellant Conejos and all the persons claiming rights under him was Php2,000.00 per month; in March 2003, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra, through his representative Cindy Digal, made verbal demands on defendant-appellant Conejos to vacate the subject property, but defendant-appellant Conejos refused to vacate the subject property, or pay reasonable compensation for the use thereof; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra was compelled to retain the services of counsel, and pay Php20,000.00 (attorney's fees) because of the defendants' unjust refusal to vacate the subject property.

The Complaint prayed that the RTC render judgment: 1) ordering defendant-appellant Conejos, and all the persons claiming rights under him, to vacate the subject property, and return possession thereof to plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra; 2) ordering defendant-appellant Conejos, and all the persons claiming rights under him, to pay plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra Php20,000.00 (attorney's fees), and the cost of suit; 3) ordering defendant-appellant Conejos, and all the persons claiming rights under him, to pay jointly and severally, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra reasonable compensation for the illegal use and occupation of the subject property in the amount of Php2,000.00 per month (from the date of the demand, until the defendants formally and actually vacate the subject property).

The RTC granted plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra's Motion with Leave to Admit the Attached Amended Complaint,[9] denied plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra's Motion to Declare Defendants As In Default, and treated defendant-appellant Conejos' Answer in Intervention[10] as the responsive pleading to the Amended Complaint.[11]

In the Answer in Intervention, defendant-appellant Conejos prayed that the RTC dismiss the Amended Complaint, and countered: defendant-appellant Conejos was the actual occupant of the subject property, and the owner of "Tagahanan Furniture," located in the subject property; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed the Complaint against defendant-appellant Conejos' saleslady, Cindy Digal, who was not a resident of the barangay where the subject property was located; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra discovered that Cindy Digal was not the actual occupant of the subject property, and plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed a similar case (Civil Case No. 07-118495) against defendant-appellant Conejos with allegations identical to the allegations in the Complaint in this case; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra did not state in his verification and certification of non-forum shopping that there was a pending similar case involving the same subject matter; the defendant-appellant' Conejos' rights and interests could be prejudiced by the outcome of this case; Cindy Digal had no legal personality in the subject property; the RTC should dismiss the Amended Complaint outright because plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra was guilty of forum-shopping.

During the pre-trial, the RTC issued the Order dated 07 September 2010 which granted plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra's motion to present evidence ex-parte after defendant-appellee Conejos failed to attend the pre-trial.[12]

Defendant-appellant Conejos moved for the reconsideration of the Order dated 07 September 2010.[13] The RTC granted defendant-appellant Conejos' motion, and set the case anew for pre-trial.[14]

However, defendant-appellant Conejos failed to file a pre-trial brief. Thus, on motion by plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra, the RTC allowed plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra to adduce evidence ex-parte.[15]

Thus, the RTC conducted trial ex-parte.

The following persons testified for plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra: plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra; and Engineer Regino Sobrevinas.

Plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra's evidence is summarized thus: plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra, and Perpetua Bocanegra (plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra's mother) were the registered owners of the 1,000 square meter parcel of land covered by TCT No. 122452,[16] and Tax Declaration No. 104524;[17] defendant-appellant Conejos, and all the persons claiming rights under him, were illegally occupying the 65 square meter subject property (which was a portion of the 1,000 square meter parcel of land owned by plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra and Perpetua Bocanegra)[18] through stealth and strategy, without the knowledge of, and permission from, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra; in 2002, the staff of plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra conducted an investigation, and informed plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra that there were illegal occupants on the subject property; plaintiff-appellee instructed his staff to verify, and get the names of the actual occupants of the subject property, and the staff informed plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra that Cindy Digal was one of the occupants; whenever plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra passed by Rizal Avenue near the LRT, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra would see the structures built on the subject property by the illegal occupants; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra did not have any verbal or written contracts with the illegal occupants which allowed them to stay on the subject property; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra made several demands on Cindy Digal to vacate the subject property, but Cindy Digal did not comply, thus plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed the Complaint against Cindy Digal and all the persons claiming rights under her; defendant-appellant Conejos intervened in this case, and claimed that he was the actual occupant of the subject property, and that Cindy Digal was his employee; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra did not make any demands on defendant-appellant Conejos to vacate the subject property because plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra already made the demand on Cindy Digal (defendant-appellant Conejos admitted that Cindy Digal was his employee); plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed the Amended Complaint and impleaded defendant-appellant Conejos as the defendant.

On 22 February 2012, the RTC rendered the assailed Decision which ruled in favor of plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra.[19] The dispositive portion of the assailed Decision read:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, this Court finds in favor of the plaintiff GEORGE M. BOCANEGRA and against the defendants. Defendant ANTONIO CONEJOS, and all those persons claiming rights under him, are hereby ordered:

- To vacate the portion of the property known as Lot 1-B of the Subdivision Plan (LRC) Psd-230517, being a portion of Lot 1 (LRC) Pcs-3279, LRC Cad Records Nos. 271 & 302 situated at 2976 Rizal Avenue Extension, Sta. Cruz, Manila covered by TCT No. 122452 and return possession thereof to the plaintiff;
- To pay the plaintiff, jointly and severally, the amount of One Thousand Pesos (P1,000.00) per month as reasonable compensation for the use and occupation of the subject premises from the date of demand on March 2003 until defendants finally and actually vacate the subject premises being occupied;
- To pay the plaintiff the amount of Twenty Thousand Pesos (Php20,000.00) representing attorney's fees; and
- To pay the cost of suit.

ORDERED.

Aggrieved, defendants-appellants filed the Notice of Appeal.[20]

In the Appellants' Brief,[21] the defendants-appellants make the following assignment of errors:

II. ASSIGNMENT OF ERRORS

- THE HONORABLE REGIONAL TRIAL COURT ERRED IN NOT APPRECIATING THAT IT HAS NO JURISDICTION OVER THE CASE.
- THE HONORABLE COURT FAILED TO APPLY FORUM SHOPPING IN THE AMENDED COMPLAINT.
- THE HONORABLE COURT ERRED IN RULING THAT DEMAND TO VACATE TO THE ORIGINAL DEFENDANT IS ALSO A DEMAND TO THE INTERVENOR.
- THE HONORABLE COURT ERRED THAT PLAINTIFF AND HIS SOLE WITNESS FAILED TO IDENTIFY THE SUBJECT PREMISES.

The issue is whether the RTC erred in not dismissing the Amended Complaint.

APPELLANTS' BRIEF

Defendant-appellant Conejos answers in the affirmative. The RTC erred in not dismissing the Amended Complaint. The Appellants' Brief thrusts: the Amended Complaint was an action for ejectment, which was not within the jurisdiction of the RTC; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra, in filing the Amended Complaint, committed forum-shopping because plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra previously filed an ejectment case involving the same subject property and the same parties, and also filed another case pending before the RTC Manila, Branch 52; the RTC erred in holding that the demand to the original defendant, Cindy Digal, could be treated as the demand to defendant-appellant Conejos; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra did not particularly describe the subject property.

APPELLEES' BRIEF

Plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra answers in the negative. The RTC did not err in not dismissing the Amended Complaint. The Appellee's Brief[22] parries: the RTC had jurisdiction over the case because the allegations in the Amended Complaint clearly indicated that this case was an action for recovery of possession, and not an action for ejectment; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra did not commit forum-shopping because Civil Case No. 07-118495 did not involve the same subject property; plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra made a verbal demand to vacate the subject property on defendant-appellant Conejos, through defendant-appellant Conejos' representative, Cindy Digal; Engineer Regino Sobrevinas clearly and specifically identified the subject property during his testimony before the RTC.

THE COURT'S RULING

Defendants-appellants' Appellants' Brief failed to comply with the requirements provided by law, and thus we must dismiss the appeal.

At the onset, we find that the defendants-appellants' appeal should be dismissed for failure to comply with the requirements of the law as to the contents of their appellants' brief.

The right to appeal is not a natural right but that which is merely granted by statute. As such, the right to appeal must be exercised in the manner prescribed by law.

Rule 44, Section 13, of the Rules of Court provides for the contents, and the prescribed format of an appellant's brief required in ordinary appealed cases, to wit:

Section 13. Contents of appellant's brief. — The appellant's brief shall contain, in the order herein indicated, the following:

(a) A subject index of the matter in the brief with a digest of the arguments and page references, and a table of cases alphabetically arranged, textbooks and statutes cited with references to the pages where they are cited;

(b) An assignment of errors intended to be urged, which errors shall be separately, distinctly and concisely stated without repetition and numbered consecutively;

(c) Under the heading "Statement of the Case," a clear and concise statement of the nature of the action, a summary of the proceedings, the appealed rulings and orders of the court, the nature of the judgment and any other matters necessary to an understanding of the nature of the controversy with page references to the record;

(d) Under the heading "Statement of Facts," a clear and concise statement in a narrative form of the facts admitted by both parties and of those in controversy, together with the substance of the proof relating thereto in sufficient detail to make it clearly intelligible, with page references to the record;

(e) A clear and concise statement of the issues of fact or law to be submitted, to the court for its judgment;

(f) Under the heading "Argument," the appellant's arguments on each assignment of error with page references to the record. The authorities relied upon shall be cited by the page of the report at which the case begins and the page of the report on which the citation is found;

(g) Under the heading "Relief," a specification of the order or judgment which the appellant seeks; and

(h) In cases not brought up by record on appeal, the appellant's brief shall contain, as an appendix, a copy of the judgment or final order appealed from.

Moreover, Rule 50, Section (1) (f) of the Rules of Court[23] provides that the absence of specific assignment of errors in the appellant's brief, or of page references to the record as required in Rule 44, Section 13 (a), (c), (d), and (f), are grounds for the dismissal of an appeal.

A perusal of the Appellants' Brief shows that it is defective in that: 1) it failed to provide a subject index, a digest of the arguments and page references, a table of cases alphabetically arranged, textbooks and statutes cited with references to the pages where they are cited; 2) it failed to provide page references to the record of matters stated in its Statement of Facts; 3) it failed to provide references to the record of matters stated in its Argument; and 4) it failed to properly cite the authorities relied upon, by not indicating the page of the report on which the citation is found.

Rules of procedure exist for a noble purpose, and to disregard such rules in the guise of liberal construction would be to defeat such purpose.[24]

Even if we are to decide this case on the merits, this appeal should also be dismissed.

We rule in the negative. The RTC did not err in not dismissing the Amended Complaint.

The Amended Complaint was an action for recovery of possession, within the jurisdiction of the RTC.

It is elementary that jurisdiction over the subject matter of a case is conferred by law and determined by the allegations in the complaint. As a necessary consequence, the jurisdiction of the court cannot be made to depend upon the defenses set up in the answer or upon the motion to dismiss; for otherwise, the question of jurisdiction would almost entirely depend upon the defendant.[25]

A perusal of the Amended Complaint shows that this is a suit for recovery of possession, and not an action for unlawful detainer. As such, the RTC had jurisdiction over the Amended Complaint.

An action for recovery of possession is the plenary action to recover the right of possession which should be brought in the proper regional trial court when dispossession has lasted for more than one year. It is an ordinary civil proceeding to determine the better right of possession of realty independently of title. In other words, if at the time of the filing of the complaint, more than one year had lapsed since defendant had turned plaintiff out of possession or defendant's possession had become illegal, the action will be, not one of forcible entry or illegal detainer, but an action for recovery of possession.[26]

In the Amended Complaint, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra prayed that the defendants-appellants vacate the subject property, and return possession thereof to plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra. Among others, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra alleged that: plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra was the registered owner of the parcel of land which covered the subject property; the defendants-appellants occupied the subject property unlawfully, through strategy and stealth, and without the knowledge and consent of plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra; the proportionate assessed value of the subject property was Php397,800.00; in March 2003, plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra made a demand on defendant-appellant Conejos to vacate the subject property, but defendant-appellant Conejos did not vacate the subject property. The records show that plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra filed the Complaint on 14 December 2007, and filed the Amended Complaint on 10 July 2009.

Clearly, when the Amended Complaint was filed on 10 July 2009, more than one year had lapsed since March 2003, when plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra made the last demand to vacate the subject property on defendant-appellant Conejos. Having been filed more than one year from the date of the last demand, the Amended Complaint was an action for recovery of possession, and not an action for ejectment.

Moreover, under Batas Pambansa Bilang 129 (“BP Blg. 129”),[27] the plenary action of action for recovery of possession must be brought before the regional trial courts. However, with the modifications introduced by Republic Act No. 7691,[28] the jurisdiction of the regional trial courts was limited to real actions where the assessed value exceeds Php20,000.00, and Php 50,000.00 where the action is filed in Metro Manila.[29] As such, the RTC correctly assumed jurisdiction over the Amended Complaint, which averred that the assessed value of the subject property was Php397,800.

Defendant-appellant Conejos failed to substantiate, through preponderance of evidence, his allegation of forum-shopping.

Anent defendant-appellant Conejos' allegation that plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra committed forum-shopping when he filed the Amended Complaint, the same must necessarily fail.

In order to determine whether a party violated the rule against forum shopping, it is essential to ascertain whether the elements of *litis pendentia* are present, or whether a final judgment in one case will amount to *res judicata* in another. The test for determining forum shopping is whether in the two (or more) cases pending, the following elements are present: 1) identity of parties; 2) identity of rights asserted and reliefs prayed for, the relief being founded on the same facts; and 3) identity of the two preceding particulars, such that any judgment rendered in the other action will, regardless of which party is successful, amount to *res judicata* in the action under consideration.[30]

Other than the bare and unsubstantiated allegations in the Answer in Intervention, defendant-appellant Conejos did not present any evidence to prove any of the above enumerated elements. As such, we find that defendant-appellant Conejos' allegation of forum-shopping was without merit.

Allegations not specifically denied are deemed admitted.

Defendant-appellant Conejos contends that the RTC erred in finding that plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra made a sufficient demand to vacate the subject property on defendant-appellant Conejos, through Cindy Digal.

We are not persuaded.

Rule 8, Section 11 of the Rules of Court is applicable. It states:

Section 11. Allegations not specifically denied deemed admitted.-- Material averment in the complaint, other than those as to the amount of liquidated damages, shall be deemed admitted when not specifically denied. Allegations of usury in a complaint to recover usurious interest are deemed admitted if not denied specifically under oath.

We agree with the findings of the RTC that defendant-appellant Conejos did not specifically deny the material averment in the Amended Complaint that plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra made a demand on defendant-appellant Conejos to vacate the subject property, through his representative Cindy Digal. As such, the allegation that the demand to vacate was made on defendant-appellant Conejos, through his representative Cindy Digal, was deemed

admitted.

In the same wise, defendant-appellant Conejos is estopped from questioning the identity of the subject property because he did not specifically deny the same in his Answer In Intervention.

Nevertheless, the records of the case show that plaintiff-appellee Bocanegra, through the testimony of the witness Engineer Regino Sobrevinas, was able to specifically identify the subject property.

All told, we find no compelling reasons to reverse the RTC's assailed Decision.

We AFFIRM the Decision dated 18 September 2012 of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 8, Manila ("RTC"), in Civil Case No. 07-118468.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Lampas Peralta, F., Chairperson and Cruz, S.C., JJ., concur.

[1] C.A. Rollo, p. 22.

[2] Records, p. 1.

[3] Records, p. 15.

[4] Records, p. 25.

[5] Order, Records, p. 48.

[6] Order, Records, p. 69.

[7] Records, p. 88.

[8] Records, p. 103.

[9] Order, Records, p. 113.

[10] Supra, note 4.

[11] Order, Records, p. 117.

[12] Records, p. 142.

[13] Motion for Reconsideration, Records, p. 145.

[14] Order, Records, p. 157.

[15] Order, Records, p. 173.

[16] Exhibit "A," Records, p. 179.

[17] Exhibit "B," Records, p. 180.

[18] Exhibits "E" to "G-1," pp. 57-58, 210-211, 223.

[19] Supra, note 1.

[20] Records, p. 242.

[21] C.A. Rollo, p. 17.

[22] C.A. Rollo, p. 39.

[23] Rule 50, Section 1 (f) of the Rules of Court states:

SECTION 1. Grounds for dismissal of appeal. – An appeal may be dismissed by the Court of Appeals, on its own motion or on that of the appellee, on the following grounds:

(a) xxx

(b) xxx

(c) xxx

(d) xxx

(e) xxx

(f) Absence of specific assignment of errors in the appellant's brief, or of page references to the record as required in Section 13, paragraphs (a), (c), (d) and (f) of Rule 44;

(g) xxx

(h) xxx

(i) xxx

[24] Mendoza v. United Coconut Planters Bank, Inc., G.R. No. 165575, 02 February 2011.

[25] City of Dumaguete v. Philippine Ports Authority, G.R. No. 168973, 24 August 2011.

[26] Republic of the Philippines v. Sunvar Realty Development Corporation, G.R. No. 194880, 20 June 2012.

[27] JUDICIARY REORGANIZATION ACT OF 1980.

[28] AN ACT EXPANDING THE JURISDICTION OF THE METROPOLITAN TRIAL COURTS, MUNICIPAL TRIAL COURTS, AND MUNICIPAL CIRCUIT TRIAL COURTS, AMENDING FOR THE PURPOSE BATAS PAMBANSA BLG. 129, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE “JUDICIARY REORGANIZATION ACT OF 1980.

[29] BP Blg. 129, Section 19 (2) provides:

SEC. 19. Jurisdiction in civil cases. — Regional Trial Courts shall exercise exclusive original jurisdiction: xxx

(2) In all civil actions which involve the title to, or possession of, real property, or any interest therein, where the assessed value of the property involved exceeds Twenty thousand pesos (P20,000.00) or, for civil actions in Metro Manila, where such value exceeds Fifty thousand pesos (P50,000.00) except actions for forcible entry into and unlawful detainer of lands or buildings, original jurisdiction over which is conferred upon the Metropolitan Trial Courts, Municipal Trial Courts, and Municipal Circuit Trial Courts.

[30] Borra v. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 167484, 09 September 2013, citing Pentacapital Investment Corporation v. Mahinay, G.R. No. 171736 and 181482, 05 July 2010.

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