

VICENTE A. CASTRO, COMPLAINANT, VS. HON. VICENTE P. BULLECER, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. 145-CFI. June 11, 1975

Ponente: MAKALINTAL, C.J.

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MAKALINTAL, C.J.:

Respondent Vicente P. Bullecera is the Judge of Branch IV, Court of First Instance of Davao Oriental. He was appointed on December 23, 1964 and took his oath of office on January 25, 1965.

In 1970 complainant Vicente A. Castro lodged his first complaint with the Department of Justice against respondent, charging him with a number of irregularities in the performance of his functions. The charges were investigated by a judicial supervisor of the Department, who rendered his report dated November 5, 1970. There is no record, however, of any action taken thereon.

On October 1, 1972 complainant addressed a second complaint, this time to the President, reiterating the previous charges. A subsequent letter, dated October 20, 1973, written by complainant to the Secretary of National Defense, contained the additional charge that respondent used to sleep and snore in court during sessions. This letter was forwarded to this Court and, together with the second complaint, was thereafter referred to respondent for comment.

On April 24, 1974, complainant was shot and killed in Davao City.

This Court nevertheless resolved to have the charges investigated (Resolution dated October 2, 1974). Associate Justice Ameurquina Melencio Herrera of the Court of Appeals was designated for that purpose.

Notwithstanding the fact that complainant had died, Justice Herrera proceeded with the investigation, subpoenaed witnesses and delved into the voluminous records of several cases not only in the Court of First Instance of Davao Oriental presided by respondent judge but also in a related case pending in Branch IV of the Court of First Instance of Manila (Special Proceeding No. 24876, Estate of Amadeo Matute Olave).

On May 26, 1975 she submitted a detailed report of the investigation she conducted, wherein she makes a thorough and painstaking analysis of the evidence, together with her findings and recommendation. We quote the essential portions as follows:

"xxx xxx xxx

"VI

The charges made by COMPLAINANT may be grouped into four:

- A. Conduct Unbecoming of a Judge
- B. Bribery
- C. 'Palakasan' system
- D. Incompetence and Ignorance of the Law

- A. Conduct Unbecoming of a Judge

It is alleged that RESPONDENT had slept and snored during Court sessions. This was denied by RESPONDENT who declared under oath: 'That is not true. I have not slept nor snored during Court sessions. There were times when I think deeply of certain testimonies that I have to jot down in my records.' (p. 54, t.s.n., Jan. 16, 1975).

Corroborating RESPONDENT's denial, Atty. Juan P. Labasano, Clerk of Court of the Court of First Instance of Mati, Davao, testified as follows:

Q

Atty. Labasano, since when have you been Clerk of Court of the CFI of Mati, Davao Oriental?

A Since July 16, 1969.

Q How long have you known the respondent, Judge Bullecer?

A I know him for a long time now. I knew him before I became clerk of court as I was appearing in the court during my practice of law in Mati, Davao Oriental.

Q When you were appointed as clerk of court of Mati, Davao Oriental, who was the Presiding Judge?

A

The Honorable Vicente Bullecer.

Q How many salas or branches did the Court have during that time?

A Only one sala.

Q Whenever the respondent Judge conducts session of the court, do you happen to attend the hearings there?

A Yes.

Q Do you attend every hearing?

A No, but I attend most of the hearings.

Q

Do you have a deputy clerk of court??

A I have only one.

Q Does he appear in some instances in your stead?

A Yes.

Q During the hearings conducted by the respondent Judge?

Q Whenever the respondent Judge holds hearings or sessions in places other than Mati, such as Maganga, Caraga, Man-ay and Lupon, do you attend the hearings in those places?

A

Yes.

Q Your deputy has not taken your place in any of these hearings?

A No, sir.

Q During the time that you have been observing the court sessions presided by Judge Bullecer, did you notice him sleeping during court sessions?

A I do not remember seeing him sleeping during court sessions.

Q Judge Bullecer is being charged, among others, of sleeping and snoring during court sessions. What can you say to that charge?

A That is not true. I used to observe the Honorable Judge and the party litigants during the hearing and as a matter of fact, he has been deciding so many cadastral cases and I have not observed him sleeping but only pondering long over the cases litigated by the parties. He used to bend down and ponder, especially over the arguments of lawyers. He has to bend down. His right eye has been operated on recently, so he has to ponder and look at the records. But I did not see him sleeping.

Q Do you know if there was any single case when lawyers placed on the record the fact that the Judge was sleeping especially during courtroom hearings?

A

There is none in the record. I do not remember any lawyer making any manifestation about that.

Q

Did you hear any complaints from any member of the bar?

A

There is no complaint from any lawyer.

Q Have you seen any complaint or information that the Judge usually sleeps used to sleep during court sessions?

A

I have not received any complaint from any litigant or any lawyer.

(pp. 44-48, t.s.n., Jan. 16, 1975)

B. Bribery

The undersigned found it impossible to determine the veracity of this charge as no witnesses were available to substantiate COMPLAINANT's allegations with respect thereto despite several subpoenas sent to them. Even the wife of COMPLAINANT who at first signified her intention to substitute him desisted from doing so for lack of personal knowledge.

C. 'Palakasan' system

It is alleged that RESPONDENT, practiced the 'palakasan' system in the granting of injunctive reliefs to favor

friends like Mariano T. Nasser regardless of the merits of the case/s, as exemplified by:

1st sub-charge: In Civil Case No. 271 of his Court, RESPONDENT issued an Order dated November 16, 1971, recognizing the leasehold rights of COMPLAINANT over three haciendas of the estate, namely Tamban, Magdug and Tiplanan (Annex B, 2nd Complaint, p. 34) and restrained respondents therein from dispossessing him of the leased properties

while in

Civil Case No. 309, RESPONDENT accepted the Complaint on September 8, 1972, issued the Summons on the same day, and granted injunctive relief to his close friend Mariano T. Nasser on the same date, in chambers (Annexes D, D-1 and D-2, 2nd Complaint, pp. 35-39).

Civil Case No. 271 is one for Injunction with Preliminary Injunction entitled:

VICENTE A. CASTRO

— versus —

GOVERNOR GIL, EX-GOVERNOR LOPEZ, alleged caretaker of the Matute Estate, and JUSTINO T. NASSER and/or Their Agents and Representatives.

Civil Case No. 309 is also one for Injunction with Preliminary Injunction entitled:

MARIANO T. NASSER, in his capacity as Special Administrator of the Amadeo Matute Olave Estate

— versus —

CARLOS V. MATUTE, RUFINO NASSER AND VICENTE CASTRO

It is true that RESPONDENT granted injunctive reliefs in both cases which appear to run contrary to each other, as in Civil Case No. 271, the injunctive relief was issued in favor of COMPLAINANT and against Ex-Governor Leopoldo Lopez and Governor Teodoro Palma Gil, in their capacities as temporary caretakers of the Matute Olave Estate; while in Civil Case No. 309 the injunctive relief was issued in favor of Mariano T. Nasser, in his capacity as Special Administrator of the Matute Olave Estate. However, the issuance of the two injunctive reliefs in these two cases covered two periods of time and were issued under different conditions, as held in the Decision of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. No. 01369-R, for Certiorari and Prohibition entitled:

VICENTE CASTRO, CARLOS V. MATUTE, MATIAS S. MATUTE, AND RUFINO T. NASSER

— versus —

HON. BULLECER AND MARIANO T. NASSER

The Decision of the Court of Appeals in that case, dated March 22, 1973, in upholding RESPONDENT's ruling in Civil Case No. 309, held in part:

'... respondent Judge acted properly in issuing the Writ of Preliminary Injunction ex-parte to avoid bloodshed and violence. That respondent Judge had previously issued a Writ of Preliminary Injunction in CC No. 271 is of no moment. Perhaps since the issuance of Writ of Preliminary Injunction in CC No. 271 on Nov. 16, 1971, the situation might have changed.

Petition denied.'

The records of Civil Case No. 309 show that after the same had been remanded to RESPONDENT's Sala, upon the Decision in CA--G.R. No. 01369 having become final and executory and an Entry of Judgment thereof having been made by the Court of Appeals, Judge Elpa of Branch X, Mati, Davao Oriental, who acted in the absence of

RESPONDENT, in an Order dated May 4, 1973, revived the injunctive relief issued by RESPONDENT in favor of Mariano T. Nasser and against COMPLAINANT, et als., on September 8, 1972, and ordered the restoration of possession to Mariano T. Nasser. It was this Order which was elevated to the Court of Appeals on Certiorari and Prohibition with Writ of Preliminary Injunction in CA-G.R. No. Sp-02063, entitled

CARLOS V. MATUTE, JOFFRE R. CANLAS, MATIAS S. MATUTE and VICENTE A. CASTRO

— versus —

HON. HOMERO D. ELPA and MARIANO T. NASSER

The Court of Appeals in its Decision dated September 13, 1973 held:

'Wherefore, the instant petition is hereby dismissed for lack of merit and the writ of preliminary injunction heretofore issued is hereby ordered lifted with costs against petitioners.' (p. 173, Roll, id., id.)

The matter was further elevated to the Supreme Court in G.R. No. L-37643 entitled

CARLOS V. MATUTE, JOFFRE R. CANLAS, VICENTE A. CASTRO and MATIAS S. MATUTE

— versus —

HON. COURT OF APPEALS, HON. HOMERO D. ELPA, and MARIANO T. NASSER

In a Resolution dated January 29, 1974, the Supreme Court denied the Petition for Review on Certiorari for lack of merit.

From the foregoing, the conclusion is inevitable that contrary to the allegations of COMPLAINANT, the injunctive reliefs issued by RESPONDENT in the cases complained of were in order and were sustained not only by the Court of Appeals but also by the Supreme Court in respect of Civil Case No. 309.

2[nd] sub-charge: In Civil Case No. 124

Rafael Santisteban, brother-in-law and dummy of Mariano T. Nasser sought to foreclose five haciendas owned by the estate with undue haste and dispatch (p. 24).

A) Notice of auction sale of alleged mortgaged haciendas, scheduled for July 25, 1970, appeared in 'Southern Review' on same date, July 25, 1970, although it was made to appear through collusion with court personnel, that the foreclosure case was filed on October 31, 1969 (2nd Complaint, pp. 23-24, Roll).

B) The Court of Appeals in CA-GR. No. 45949-R, on September 27, 1971 declared null and void the Decision rendered by respondent Judge in CC No. 124 as well as all proceedings held therein, (Annexes J, J-1 and J-2, 2[nd] Complaint, pp. 53-55, id.).

Civil Case No. 124 is entitled RAFAEL SANTISTEBAN versus MATIAS S. MATUTE in his capacity as co-administrator of the Amadeo Matute Estate. It was one for Foreclosure of some of the properties of the Testate Estate of Amadeo Matute Olave. A Compromise Agreement was entered into by the parties therein with the defendant acknowledging liability to plaintiff-mortgagee for the mortgage debt of P400,000.00, and judgment was rendered accordingly by RESPONDENT. RESPONDENT in due time ordered the sale of the mortgaged properties and eventually confirmed the sale.

The case was elevated on Certiorari and Prohibition to the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. No. 45949-R, entitled

CARLOS V. MATUTE, General Administrator, CONCHITA V. MATUTE, CECILIA V. MATUTE, EDUARDO MATUTE JOVEN, heirs of Matute Estate, JOFFRE R. CANLAS, transferee pendente lite of Ramon Matute, SISENANDO RIVERA, JR., as Judgment Vendee in CC No. 3285, CFI, Pampanga;

PATERNO R. CANLAS, as holder of lawyer's lien, approved by Supreme Court in G.R. No. L-27832

— versus —

HON. BULLECER, Pres. Judge, JUAN P. LABASANO, Clerk of CFI, Davao Oriental, TEODORO NANO, JR., Register of Deeds of Davao, RAFAEL SANTISTEBAN, MARIANO T. NASSER and MATIAS S. MATUTE

The Court of Appeals, in its Decision dated September 27, 1971, ruled:

'Wherefore, herein Petition is hereby granted. The Decision rendered by the respondent Judge and all the proceedings had pursuant thereto are hereto declared void and of no effect; the injunction against respondent Register of Deeds, insofar as the Real Estate Mortgage subject matter of herein petition is concerned, is hereby made permanent; the Motions Contempt filed by petitioners and respondents are hereby dismissed for lack of sufficient merit; without pronouncement as to costs.'

While it may be that the Court of Appeals set aside RESPONDENT's Decision in Civil Case No. 124 of his Court, it is to be noted that said Decision was rendered pursuant to a Compromise Agreement between the parties. It cannot justifiably be alleged, therefore, that RESPONDENT was influenced by his friendship with anyone in so deciding. The foreclosure proceeding appear to have been conducted legally and regularly. The Order to sell as well as the Notice of Public Auction Sale were also duly published.

3rd sub-charge: 'As long as per request of Mariano T. Nasser, Judge Bullecce always accommodate his close friend as per record of his court, the said Judge always preside and handle all his cases without benefit of raffle.' (2nd Complaint, Oct. 1, 1972, p. 26, Roll).

In this connection, Atty. Juan P. Labasano Clerk of Court of the Court of First Instance, Mati, Davao Oriental, testified upon questions propounded by this Investigator as follows:

Q

x x x is it a fact that no raffle is conducted of cases which have been assigned to the respondent Judge?

A During the first year of my service up to 1970, there was only one sala.

Q That was in 1970?

A From 1969 up to 1970. There was no necessity to raffle the cases. Then, sometime in the later part of 1970, or 1971 to 1973 up to now, we used to conduct raffle of cases. We used to conduct raffle of cases now that we have two salas in Mati, Davao Oriental.

Q

Who conducts the raffle?

A Myself, Your Honor.

Q Not the executive judge?

A The clerk of court conducts the raffle.

Q

I see. You brought eleven cases with you. Could you go over them very cursorily and inform us which of these cases were raffled and which cases were not?

A

The mode of raffle that we adopted is if the number of the case is even, it is assigned to Branch X and if the number is odd, it is assigned to Branch IV. We adopted this, your Honor, because the two judges mutually agreed between themselves in my presence that in order to hasten and avoid unnecessary delays, the case should be filed and assigned to Branch X and if the number is odd, to Branch IV. But from 1969 to 1970, there was no raffle.

Q

Will you identify these cases chronologically?

A

Case 124. This was not raffled because this was filed on October 21, 1969.

Q Next case, 271. Filed on what date?

A

In the later part of October, 1971. This was already raffled and since this is an odd number, it is assigned to Branch IV.

Q

Next case, 309. When was it filed?

A

1972. This was already raffled. It was filed on September 8, 1972.

Q

This is an odd number. It should have gone to Branch IV.

A

Yes, your Honor.

Q

058.

A

Filed in 1968. Not raffled, your Honor.

Q

127. Filed when?

A

1969. Not raffled.

Q

138. Filed when?

A

February, 1970, not yet raffled.

Q

174.

A

Filed in the early part of 1970. Not yet raffled.

Q

175.

A

Filed on May 25, 1970. Not yet raffled.

Q

176.

A

Filed also on May 25, 1970. Not yet raffled.

Q 196.

A

Filed in 1970. Not raffled, your Honor.

Q

204.

A

Filed in 1970. Not raffled also.

(pp. 57-63, t.s.n., Jan. 16, 1975)

Note should also be taken of the finding of Judicial Supervisor Jose V. Icasiano as follows:

'Upon investigation, the following were brought to light. During the whole month of July, 1970, Judge Bullecer conducted session in the municipality of Bagangga, some 180 kms. from Mati, in compliance with directive from the Department of Justice. While the Court was holding session in Bagangga, the Deputy Clerk of Court, Mr. Gaudencio Corias, received petitions from parties at Bagangga. However, not knowing what will be the corresponding case numbers for those petitions received at Bagangga, Mr. Corias wired the Clerk of Court at Mati to make reservations in the evil case docket book. That is why, Mrs. Elisa Varquez, clerk of the CFI, wired back to Mr. Corias that the petitions received by him should be numbered 069 and 070 with the word or notation 'reserved' for the entry of the petitions acknowledged at Bagangga. When the court returned to Mati, the clerk of the court entered the case in the docket books of the court.' (pp. 9-10, Memorandum for the Respondent)

From that foregoing, the conclusion is likewise evident that there is not even a semblance of truth to this charge

made by COMPLAINANT.

D. Incompetence and Ignorance of the Law

This is alleged to be exemplified by the following actuations and interpretations of RESPONDENT:

'(a) When the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. No. 01093-R issued the injunctive writ against Judge Serafin Cuevas and against Mariano T. Nasser, appointed by the former as Special Administrator of the Matute estate, from performing his duties as such special administrator and that "if an order appointing a special administrator, caretaker, or receiver is already issued the same he held in abeyance until further notice from this Court" (par. 6, 2nd Complaint), deceased complainant alleged that 'to my astonishment the respondent, Judge Vicente P. Bullecer, ruled that the words 'held in abeyance' meaning to continue or proceed - to this I can say he is incompetent, notoriously undesirable and ignorant of the law or he is just trying to suppress the order the Appellate Court' (id. id.);

'(b) Respondent Judge, in ignorance of the rules on procedure, issued a writ of injunction in Civil Case No. 138 directed against a court of concurrent jurisdiction, i.e., 'Judge Bullecer restrained the CFI of Pampanga in Civil Case 3641, entitled 'Aurora Fe Rivera Canlas, joined by her husband, Atty. -Paterno R. Canlas versus Mariano T. Nasser' (1st Complaint, p. 27, Record), which order was later on restrained by the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. No. 44856-R (id., id.).'

'(c) In Civil Case Nos. 174, 175 and 176, respondent Judge issued Writs of Preliminary Injunction without notice to defendants.'

An examination, however, of Civil Case No. 309, supra, filed by Mariano T. Nasser as an offshoot of the Writ of Preliminary Injunction issued by the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. No. 01093-R yielded the Order of RESPONDENT dated November 14, 1972 which stated: 'In view of the Resolution adopted by the Court of Appeals, this Court will not proceed with the hearing of this civil case so that the hearing is hereby suspended until further notice and/or order from the Court of Appeals' (p. 128, Civil Case No. 309).

Again, therefore, the charge is without merit.

Civil Case No. 138 is entitled

MARIANO T. NASSER

— versus —

The Chief of Police of Governor Generoso and the Chief of Police of San Isidro, both in the province of Davao Oriental and/or their Agents and Deputies.

Nasser alleged in his Complaint that he is the lessee of haciendas La Union, Montserrat, Sigaboy, Pundaguitan and Colatinan, all situated in Davao Oriental and forming part of the vast Matute Estate; that on February 8, 1970, Nasser received a letter from defendant Chief of Police of Governor Generoso, advising him that the CFI of Pampanga, First Branch, in Civil Case No. 3641 entitled 'Aurora Fe Rivera Canlas vs. Mariano Nasser,' had deputized said defendant to attach the products as well as the copra in the aforementioned haciendas; that on February 10, 1970, defendants appeared at Hacienda La Union to effect the attachment of the products therein; that said defendants have no right whatsoever to act as deputies of the Pampanga CFI since the Provincial Sheriff of Davao Oriental is the person authorized by law to serve such process, there being no showing that the latter is incapacitated to perform his duties.

The Complaint then prayed that the Chiefs of Police be enjoined from enforcing the Writ of Attachment issued by the Pampanga CFI. On March 3, 1970, RESPONDENT granted a restraining order ex-parte upon plaintiffs posting of a bond in the amount of P10,000.00.

This Order was elevated to the Court of Appeals on Certiorari and Prohibition with Preliminary Injunction in CA-G.R. No. 44856-R entitled

AURORA RIVERA CANLAS, PATERNO R. CANLAS and the CHIEF OF POLICE OF SAN ISIDRO,
DAVAO ORIENTAL

— versus —

HONORABLE JUDGE VICENTE P. BULLECER, and MARIANO T. NASSER

Quoted hereunder is the Decision dated October 10, 1970 of the Court of Appeals:

'WHEREFORE, the Amended Writ of Preliminary Injunction issued by this Court in this case on June 16, 1970 directing respondent Judge to 'REFRAIN from enforcing and continuing to enforce the writ of preliminary injunctions issued by you in Civil Cases Nos. 138, 174, 175, 176 of the CFI of Davao Oriental entitled Mariano Nasser vs. Chief of Police of Gov. Generoso and Chief of Police of San Isidro, both of Davao Oriental, against therein respondents Chiefs of Police or any party who may be designated and deputed as Special Sheriff by the CFI of Pampanga in CC No. 3641, as well as from continuing to hear CC No. 138; and likewise REFRAIN from hearing CC No. 140, 174, 175, 176 or any case brought before you by any party that has for its purpose to render nugatory or ineffective, impede and obstruct, the writ of attachment issued in CC No. 3641 of the CFI of Pampanga, the levy thereof, and the possession of the attached properties by the Special Sheriff or his deputies, and from issuing any writ of injunction, preliminary or permanent, thereat to attain the purpose aforesaid; and if any other writ of preliminary injunction had already been issued in another case, more particularly CC No. 138, 174, 175 and 176 for the same purpose and having the same effect, the enforcement and implementation thereof should be discontinued and set aside at whatever stage it may be found' and directing private respondent Mariano T. Nasser also to 'REFRAIN from interfering and taking possession of the properties levied on attachment, more particularly on the copras being produced on the properties subject to leasehold rights and levied on attachment by the special sheriff, Chief of Police of Governor Generoso, namely: Haciendas La Union, Sigaboy, Montserrat, Pundaguitan and Colatinan, all located at Governor Generoso, Davao Oriental, and from impeding and obstructing the Writ of Attachment issued in Civil Case No. 3641, Court of First Instance of Pampanga,' is hereby made permanent, with costs against said private respondent Nasser.' (pp. 948-949, Roll)

In his defense respondent Judge claims that his said Order is valid and has a legal basis, citing the case of Paredes, et al. vs. Hon. Jose L. Moya, etc., et al., L-38051, promulgated on December 26, 1974, quoting therefrom: 'No Writ of Execution should issue against the properties of the deceased. The claim for satisfaction of the money judgement should be presented in the probate court for payment by the administrator' . . . all properties being in custodia legis and the proper procedure is not to allow the sheriff, in the case of court judgment, to seize the properties but to ask the court for an order to require the administrator to pay the amount due from the estate and required to be paid.' Concluding, respondent's counsel alleges that RESPONDENT was even advanced in his interpretation of the law.

Whatever the merits of the foregoing ratiocination, the most that can be said against RESPONDENT is that he had committed an error of judgment in Civil Case No. 138 pending before his Court. Erroneous rulings committed by a Trial Judge, however are not necessarily grounds for administrative charges.

"VII

Upon the facts and explanations given by RESPONDENT, and from a painstaking study of the cases involved, the Investigator has arrived at the foregoing conclusions:

1. Despite the gravity of the charge of Bribery hurled against RESPONDENT, the same should be dismissed

for want of substantial evidence.

2. The charge of 'conduct unbecoming of a judge' has been disproved, there being no reason to doubt the testimony of RESPONDENT's witness.

3. The charges that RESPONDENT had practiced the 'palakasan' system; that he was incompetent and ignorant of the law, are not borne out by the records.

WHEREFORE, it is respectfully recommended that respondent Judge be exonerated of the charges and that this Administrative Case against him be dismissed.

Manila, May 26, 1975."

We find the foregoing report duly supported by the record, and pursuant to the investigator's recommendation, hereby dismiss the complaint and exonerate respondent of the charges against him.

Castro, Teehankee, Makasiar, Esguerra, and Munoz Palma, JJ., concur.

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