

ROLANDO M. BANDILLA, JR., PETITIONER, VS. OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN AND EMMA C.L. LIN, RESPONDENTS.

Ponente: BRUSELAS, JR. J.

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BRUSELAS, JR. J.:

Before us is a petition for review under Rule 43 which seeks to reverse and set aside the Decision[1] and Order[2] of the public respondent Office of the Ombudsman ("Ombudsman"), Office of the Deputy Ombudsman for the Military and Other Law Enforcement Offices, in action for violation of Republic Act (RA) No. 6713, otherwise known as the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees, the dispositive portion of which reads:

"WHEREFORE, premises considered, there being substantial evidence, respondents F/CSUPT ROLANDO M. BANDILLA, JR. and F/CINSP JHUFEL M. BRAÑANOLA, are hereby found GUILTY of Conduct Prejudicial To The Best Interest of the Service, and meted the penalty of SUSPENSION from office without pay for a period of NINE (9) MONTHS, there being no attending mitigating or aggravating circumstances present, in accordance with CSC Resolution No. 991936, otherwise known as the Uniform Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service, in relation to the Rules of Procedure of the Office of the Ombudsman (Administrative Order No. 7, as amended by Administrative Order No. 17, dated 07 September 2003).

Let the Honorable Secretary, Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), be furnished with this Decision, for immediate appropriate action and implementation.

SO ORDERED."[3]

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"WHEREFORE, premises considered, it is respectfully recommended that the Motion for Reconsideration filed by respondents-movants F/CSUPT Rolando Bandilla and F/CINSP Jhufel M. Brananol, be DENIED. Accordingly, the Decision dated 15 September 2011 bearing upon the above-captioned administrative case is AFFIRMED.

SO RESOLVED."[4]

The antecedent facts of the case are as follows:

The petition stemmed from a complaint-affidavit[5] filed by Emma C.L. Lin ("Lin") against F/CSupt. Rolando M. Bandilla, Jr. ("Bandilla") and F/CInsp. Jhufel M. Brañanola ("Brañanola"), Acting Chief and Chief of the Intelligence and Investigation Division (IID) of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), respectively, for the Violation of Section 3 (a), (e) and (i)[6] of Republic Act (RA) No. 3019, as amended, otherwise known as the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act. In the said complaint-affidavit, Lin also sought the administrative indictment of Bandilla and Brañanola, thus, they were also charged with the administrative offenses of Violation of RA 6713 and Misconduct.

Petitioner Lin alleged that she was doing business under the name and style of State Security Agency and owned

the clustered warehouse buildings located at No. 639 Banga 1[st] Cabyawan, Plaridel, Bulacan ("subject property"). The warehouse buildings were leased to three (3) different companies, namely: Alpha Plus International Enterprises Corporation, Darlie Trading Corporation and Marubishi Manufacturing Industries, Incorporated.

On February 24, 2008, at around 3:00 AM, a fire broke out within the subject property. The fire incident, which reached 4[th] Alarm fire status, was declared officially "Fire Out" at around 7:00 AM of the same day. The subject property was destroyed by fire, including all other properties found therein. Investigation of the said fire incident followed in order to determine the cause of the fire.

On April 3, 2008, the Final Investigation Report[7] ("1[st] report") regarding the fire incident on the subject property was issued, which was prepared and signed by SPO4 Dante I. Navea ("Navea") and Insp. Romeo A. Pepito, Jr. ("Pepito") Senior Fire Arson Investigator and Chief, respectively of the Fire Arson Investigation Section, IID BFP NHQ. In the findings of the said report, it was determined that the "fire incident was accidental in nature", and that the cause of the fire can be attributed to electrical ignition primarily due to grounding. It was consequently recommended that the "...case be considered closed/solved for being accidental in nature, without prejudice to reinvestigation by this office if certainty warrants. Issuance of Fire Clearance Certification to the fire victims xxx is deemed in order..."[8] Lin thus filed for and was later issued a Fire Clearance Certification[9] on April 8, 2008 signed by Director Enrique C. Linsangan.

The subject property being insured under Fire Policy No. F-2008-200700519 in the amount of Fifty-Six Million Pesos (P 56M) and Fire Policy No. F-2008-200700518 in the amount of Two Million Pesos (P2M), both under Malayan Insurance Company Incorporated ("Malayan"), Lin, thus, filed her claim for indemnity. The insurance claim made by Lin, however, was denied by Malayan, prompting the former to request for the assistance of the Insurance Commission (IC) regarding her claims against the insurance company.[10]

For its part, Malayan wrote a letter[11] to BFP dated March 23, 2009, requesting for a re-investigation of the fire incident. In the said letter, Malayan represented that it is the insurer of the subject property gutted by fire.

On April 20, 2009, petitioner Bandilla issued Bureau Order No. OTH-2009-081,[12] which directed the composition of the Panel of Arson Investigators tasked to conduct a re-investigation of the fire incident which occurred on the subject property. The panel was composed of Brañanola as team leader and SFO2 Felix B. Romero and SFO2 Vivencio M. Talle, Jr. as members. Such order was amended the next day, April 21, 2009, substituting SFO2 Romero with SFO1 Rogelio T. Baran (1[st] Panel).

On May 14, 2009, the 1[st] panel submitted its Re-investigation Report[13] ("2[nd] Report"), which recommended to the Acting Chief, BFP that the findings of the BFP as stated in its 1[st] Report and Fire Clearance Certification be not disturbed considering the absence of newly discovered evidence. The 2[nd] report was duly approved and signed by respondent Bandilla.

The IC, on the other hand, who was conducting its own investigation regarding matters with respect to the insurance claims of complainant, received a copy of the 2[nd] Report on May 29, 2009. Subsequently, on June 11, 2009, Insurance Commissioner Eduardo Malinis sent a letter[14] to the President of Malayan, recommending that the company should reconsider its denial of the insurance claim of complainant Lin against it. This prompted Malayan to request for a reconsideration by BFP of its 2[nd] report via its letter dated July 2, 2009.[15]

On July 27, 2009, the 2[nd] Panel submitted its Re-evaluation Report[16] ("3[rd] Report"), which recommended to the Acting Chief, BFP, "to consider and declare fire incident that gutted the clustered warehouse buildings xxx to be UNDETERMINED", considering the contradicting findings of the BFP and the forensic report conducted by

Malayan. The 3[rd] report was duly approved and signed by Bandilla.[17]

Aggrieved, Lin, through her counsel, wrote a letter-request to the National Bureau of Investigation "to investigate the alleged irregularities in the issuance of the 3[rd] Report." On the basis of its own investigation of the alleged irregularities of the 3[rd] Report, Roel Jovenir ("Jovenir") of the Anti-Fraud and Computer Crimes Division of the NBI prepared a Progress Report,[18] wherein it was found that "by their collective acts of defrauding the fire victims, an inference can be drawn that BANDILLA, NAVEA, PEPITO, FIGURASIN AND BRAÑANOLA acted in conspiracy with each other in order to create doubt on the findings of BFP." In the same report, Jovenir pertinently stated that he "will invite F/CSUPT BANDILLA to his command to shed light on the above subject matter." [19]

In her Complaint-Affidavit, Position Paper and Manifestation, Lin alleged that she was defrauded of her just monetary insurance claims against Malayan through the sinister acts of Bandilla and Brañanola. The acts that she alleged to be prejudicial to her are:

1. The act of Brañanola of offering substantial amounts of money to Figurasin, Pepito and Navea to create a doubt as to their earlier finding that the fire was accidental in nature.
2. The issuance by Bandilla of the Memorandum dated July 3, 2009 for the Re-evaluation of the fire incident which occurred in the subject property; that Bandilla used his official position to whimsically and arbitrarily accede to the request of Malayan to re-evaluate the 2[nd] Report despite strong opposition on the part of Lin; and that clearly, the only purpose of this reevaluation was to create doubts on the previous findings of BFP to make it appear that the cause of the fire was not accidental in nature.
3. The irregularities and anomalies that attended the issuance of the 3[rd] Report; that Figurasin, Pepito and Navea succumbed to the pressure exerted by Brañanola by signing such report which showed a change of findings of the BFP as to the cause of the fire from "accidental" to "undetermined"; that verily, the act of Bandilla in approving such report was prejudicial to Lin.

Significantly, Lin alleged that "prior to the release of the 2[nd] Report, her counsel got hold of three duly notarized Affidavits xxx executed by Figurasin, Pepito and Navea wherein they categorically declared and admitted that they were offered substantial amount of money by Brañanola in order to re-open the fire investigation and create doubt as to the initial findings of the BFP that the fire was accidental in nature." [20]

In their respective Counter-Affidavit and Position Paper filed before the Ombudsman, both Bandilla and Brañanola, in essence, were in unison in vehemently denying the wrongful acts imputed against them for being baseless, having no basis in fact and in law. Both of them alleged that their acts were performed regularly and invoked the presumption of regularity in the performance of official functions. Both likewise alleged in their respective compliances that on December 10, 2009, Bureau Order No. COM-2009-077 was issued, creating an Independent Body/Committee for the purpose of resolving with finality the fire incident which occurred on the subject property.

For his part, Bandilla raised the defense that he had not been invited by the NBI to present his side, thus the Progress Report should not have included him in its conclusion that he acted in conspiracy with the other officers. In addition, he alleged that in the Affidavits executed by Pepito, Figurasin and Navea, all dated April 28, 2009, "nowhere in the four corners of these Affidavits xxx can the name and/or identity of Bandilla be found as among those who were allegedly present when the supposed offers of money were allegedly made", that such affidavits do not have a bearing against him, thus, he should not have been included in the complaint.

On the other hand, Brañanola interposed the defense that on February 4, 2010, Pepito, Figurasin and Navea executed affidavits rectifying and retracting the allegations in their affidavits which were in the possession of Lin.

The Ombudsman thereafter rendered the assailed decision against the BFP officers. Petitioner Bandilla and Brañanola filed their Motion for Reconsideration but it was denied via the assailed Order.

Hence, this petition filed by Bandilla.

Petitioner Bandilla submits the following issues in support of his petition:

"I.

WHETHER OR NOT THE PETITIONER WAS AFFORDED DUE PROCESS IN THE PROCEEDINGS IN THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN;

II.

WHETHER OR NOT THE FINAL INVESTIGATION REPORT DATED 3 APRIL 2008 (1[st] Report), RE-INVESTIGATION REPORT DATED 14 MAY 2009 (2[nd] Report) WERE ISSUED WITH FINALITY;

III.

WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL EVIDENCE TO HOLD THE PETITIONER ADMINISTRATIVELY LIABLE FOR CONDUCT PREJUDICIAL TO THE BEST INTEREST OF THE SERVICE; and

IV.

WHETHER OR NOT MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES FAVORING THE PETITIONER WERE PRESENT."

We fail to find merit in the petition.

Bandilla maintains that he was denied due process in the proceedings before the Ombudsman because he was not informed that he was also the subject of an administrative complaint for violation of RA 6713. According to him, he was required to answer for an alleged violation of RA 6713, with no specific provision, when the same was not even mentioned, alleged or adverted to in the complaint-affidavit which merely mentioned violation of RA 3019. He was likewise found guilty of Conduct Prejudicial to the Best Interest of the Service, an administrative offense punishable under another law, more particularly Section 46, (b) (27) Book V of Executive Order (EO) No. 292, otherwise known as the Administrative Code of 1987, as amended, which was not also alleged in the said complaint-affidavit. He thus claims a clear transgression of his right to be informed of the specific nature and cause of the supposed administrative accusations against him.

The records of the case, however, show that petitioner Bandilla, together with Brañanola, were able to file their respective counter-affidavits and position papers wherein they had interposed their defenses to the formal charges against them, for both violation of RA 3019 and RA 6713. Bandilla was shown to have filed a Motion for Reconsideration of the assailed decision as well as an Urgent Motion for Early Resolution and Manifestation. Hence, Bandilla's protestations that he had been deprived of due process must necessarily fail.

We must remember that due process is satisfied when a person is notified of the charge against him and given an opportunity to explain or defend himself. In administrative proceedings, the filing of charges and giving reasonable opportunity for the person so charged to answer the accusations against him constitute the minimum requirements of due process.[21] Due process is simply having the opportunity to explain one's side, or an opportunity to seek a reconsideration of the action or ruling complained of.[22] Any seeming defect in its observance is cured by the filing of a motion for reconsideration. To reiterate, denial of due process cannot be successfully invoked by a party who has had the opportunity to be heard on his motion for reconsideration.[23]

The essence of due process is that a party is afforded reasonable opportunity to be heard and to submit any evidence he may have in support of his defense.[24] Mere opportunity to be heard is sufficient. As long as

petitioner was given the opportunity to explain his side and present evidence, the requirements of due process are satisfactorily complied with because what the law abhors is an absolute lack of opportunity to be heard.[25]

As shown by the submitted documents, the Ombudsman via the Order dated January 22, 2010 ordered Bandilla and Brañanola to answer the criminal aspect, docketed as OMB-P-C-10-0010-A for violation of RA 3019 and the administrative aspect, separately docketed as OMB-P-A-10-0013-A, the subject case herein, for violation of RA 6713 and Misconduct. They were thus informed of the nature and cause of the accusations against them from the beginning, of the proceedings, and the complaint-affidavit of Lin and her supporting documents were attached to the Order to apprise Bandilla and Brañanola of the material allegations thereof. The complaint-affidavit, specifically for the criminal offense of violation of RA 3019, does not preclude the public respondent from also pursuing the administrative aspect against the petitioner and Brañanola. It is not the designation of the offense in the complaint, but the body of material allegations thereof that is controlling.

Bandilla claims that the Final Investigation Report dated April 3, 2008 (1[st] Report), Re-investigation Report dated 14 May 2009 (2[nd] Report) were not issued with finality. He asserts that the actual text and language used in the said reports, stating - "without prejudice to case reopening or reinvestigation," can hardly be equated to the Ombudsman's notion that they were issued with finality.

The Ombudsman correctly observed that the 2[nd] Report, which was approved by Bandilla, did contain a "without prejudice to reinvestigation clause," unlike the 1[st] Report. The 2[nd] Report was the result of the March 23, 2009 letter-request of Malayan to conduct a re-investigation of the fire incident per the 1[st] Report. This 2[nd] Report considered the findings in the 1[st] Report as well as evidence from the foreign, forensic expert of Malayan and concluded that such foreign, forensic, expert evidence did not have ample weight and was questionable. It was only Bandilla's request for a third investigation that a Memorandum was issued directing Brañanola, Pepito, Figurasin and Navea (2[nd] Panel) to conduct a further re-investigation of the real cause of the fire and to compare the results with the BFP's earlier reports and findings. This further re-investigation ended in a 3[rd] Report that concluded the cause of the fire to be "undetermined".

There is no question that Bandilla, as a public officer, had authority to issue Bureau Order No. OTH-2009-081 that directed the 2[nd] Panel to conduct further reinvestigation of the fire incident and issue an exhaustive review and re-evaluation thereafter. What was violative of RA 6713, however, was the act of Bandilla in conspiring with Brañanola to come up with the 3[rd] Report that declared the cause of the fire as "undetermined," which effectively denied the insurance claims of Lin. The separate affidavits executed by Pepito, Figurasin and Navea that pointed to Brañanola as the person who offered money from Malayan for the re-opening of the case and for them to create a doubt about the cause of the fire, taken together with the abrupt, complete overturn of the two earlier BFP findings from "accidental in nature" to "undetermined," contained in the 3[rd] Report which petitioner Bandilla signed and approved, provide substantial evidence that support the Ombudsman's finding against Bandilla for the commission of Conduct Prejudicial to the Best Interest of the Service punishable under Section 46 (b) (27), Book V of the Administrative Code of 1987.

In *Philippine Retirement Authority v. Rupa*,[26] the Supreme Court elaborated on the specific acts that constitute the grave offense of conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service, considering that no concrete description is provided under the Civil Service Law and rules. The Court outlined therein the following acts: misappropriation of public funds, abandonment of office, failure to report back to work without prior notice, failure to keep in safety public records and property, making false entries in public documents, and falsification of court orders.

In *Avenido v. Civil Service Commission*,[27] the Supreme Court explained that acts may constitute Conduct Prejudicial to the Best Interest of the Service when they tarnish the image and integrity of his or her public office.

The Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees (R.A. No. 6713) enunciates, inter alia, the State policy of promoting a high standard of ethics and utmost responsibility in the public service. Section 4(c) of the Code commands that "[public officials and employees] shall at all times respect the rights of others, and shall refrain from doing acts contrary to law, good morals, good customs, public policy, public order, public safety and public interest."

Applying this principle to the present case, it is our view that the petitioner's offense is of the same gravity or odiousness as that of the aforementioned acts and would likewise amount to conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service.

A finding of guilt in an administrative case may be sustained for as long as it is supported by substantial evidence that the respondent (the petitioner in this case) has committed the acts charged.[28] The quantum of proof required for a finding of guilt is only substantial evidence, that amount of relevant evidence which a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to justify a conclusion.[29] The standard of substantial evidence is satisfied when there is reasonable ground to believe that respondent is responsible for the misconduct complained of,[30] even if such evidence might not be overwhelming[31] or even preponderant.[32]

Further, the factual findings of the Office of the Ombudsman when supported by substantial evidence are conclusive, and such findings made by an administrative body which has acquired expertise are accorded not only respect but even finality.[33] Thus, the Court adopts and concurs with the findings of the Ombudsman in finding Bandilla guilty of the administrative offense.

Anent the proper imposable penalty, Bandilla claims that there are attendant mitigating circumstances present which should be taken in consideration in his favor. Bandilla claims that in paragraphs 20 and 22 of his Counter-Affidavit, he discussed at length his government service from June 14, 1986 (as a Fire Lieutenant, Deputy Regional Fire Marshall) up to March 6, 2009 (as acting BFP Chief). Petitioner likewise invokes good faith in defending his decision to cause the investigation of the fire incident. He thus claims that the mitigating circumstances of length of service and good faith must be appreciated in his favor in the imposition of an administrative penalty in accordance with the Uniform Rules of Administrative Cases in the Civil Service.

Length of service in government is not always a mitigating factor. At times, it can even aggravate the commission of an offense such as, when the long years of service is taken advantage of to precisely camouflage ill conduct. As for the invocation of good faith, the same cannot be appreciated as it is clear from the circumstances of the case that Bandilla's wrongful, official actuations, which manifested partiality and evident bad faith to the prejudice of Lin and to Malayan's unwarranted advantage, prejudiced the public service.

WHEREFORE, the petition is DENIED DUE COURSE. Consequently, the assailed Decision and Order are AFFIRMED.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Reyes, Jr., (Chairperson), and Gaerlan, JJ., concur.

[1] Written by Special Prosecution Officer II Rodil R. Casal II of the Office of the Deputy Ombudsman for the Military and Other Law Enforcement Offices, Office of the Ombudsman on September 15, 2011 in OMB-P-A-10-0013-A; Rollo, pp. 35-46.

[2] Rollo, pp. 47-52.

[3] Rollo, pp. 44-45.

[4] Ibid, pp. 50-51.

[5] Ibid, pp. 160-167.

[6] SECTION 3. Corrupt practices of public officers. — In addition to acts or omissions of public officers already penalized by existing law, the following shall constitute corrupt practices of any public officer and are hereby declared to be unlawful:

(a)

Persuading, inducing or influencing another public officer to perform an act constituting a violation of rules and regulations duly promulgated by competent authority or an offense in connection with the official duties of the latter, or allowing himself to be persuaded, induced, or influenced to commit such violation or offense.

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(e)

Causing any undue injury to any party, including the Government, or giving any private party any unwarranted benefits, advantage or preference in the discharge of his official administrative or judicial functions through manifest partiality, evident bad faith or gross inexcusable negligence. This provision shall apply to officers and employees of offices or government corporations charged with the grant of licenses or permits or other concessions.

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(i)

Directly or indirectly becoming interested, for personal gain, or having a material interest in any transaction or act requiring the approval of a board, panel or group of which he is a member, and which exercises discretion in such approval, even if he votes against the same or does not participate in the action of the board, committee, panel or group.

Interest for personal gain shall be presumed against those public officers responsible for the approval of manifestly unlawful, inequitable, or irregular transactions or acts by the board, panel or group to which they belong.

[7] Rollo, pp. 53-60 and pp. 168-175.

[8] Ibid, p. 60 and p. 174.

[9] Ibid, p. 61 and p. 208.

[10] Ibid, pp. 211-212.

[11] Rollo, pp. 62-65.

[12] Ibid, p. 66.

[13] Ibid, pp. 67-69 and pp. 218-221.

[14] Ibid, pp. 228-239.

[15] Rollo, pp. 241-243.

[16] Ibid, pp. 247-250.

[17] Ibid, p. 250.

[18] Ibid, pp. 254-263.

[19] Ibid, p. 263.

[20] Rollo, pp. 222-227.

[21] Gonzales v. Office of the President of the Philippines, G.R. No. 196231, September 04, 2012, 679 SCRA 614, citing Cayago v. Lina, G.R. NO. 149539, January 19, 2005, 449 SCRA 29.

[22] Ibid, citing Libres v. NLRC, G.R. No. 123737, May 28, 1999, 307 SCRA 675.

[23] Pontejos v. Desierto, G.R. No. 148600, July 7, 2009, 592 SCRA 64.

[24] Gonzales v. Office of the President of the Philippines, supra at footnote 21, citing Concerned Officials of MWSS v. Vasquez, G.R. No. 109113, January 25, 1995, 240 SCRA 502.

[25] Gonzales v. Office of the President of the Philippines, supra at footnote 21, citing AMA Computer College-East Rizal v. Ignacio, G.R. No. 178520, June 23, 2009, 590 SCRA 633.

[26] G.R. No. 140519, August 21, 2001, 363 SCRA 480.

[27] G.R. No. 177666, April 30, 2008, 553 SCRA 711.

[28] Badiola v. Court of Appeals, G.R. NO. 170691, April 23, 2008, 552 SCRA 562, citing Tecson v. Sandiganbayan, G.R. No. 123045, November 16, 1999, 318 SCRA 80.

[29] Badiola v. Court of Appeals, ibid; Aranda v. Alvarez, A.M. No. P-04-1889, November 23, 2007, 538 SCRA 162.

[30] Consolidated Food Corporation v. National Labor Relations Commission, G.R. No. 118647, 23 September 1999, 315 SCRA 129.

[31] Advincula v. Dicen, G.R. No. 162403, May 16, 2005, 458 SCRA 696.

[32] Coca Cola Bottlers Philippines, Inc. v. National Labor Relations Commission, G.R. No. 78787, 18 December 1989, 180 SCRA 195.

[33] Estarija v. Ranada, G. R. NO. 159314, June 26, 2006, 492 SCRA 652; Commission on Audit v. Hinampas, G.R. NO. 158672, August 07, 2007, 529 SCRA 245.

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