

ATTY. HUGOLINO V. BALAYON, JR., PETITIONER, VS. JUDGE GAYDIFREDO O. OCAMPO, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. MTJ-91-619. January 29, 1993

Ponente: CAMPOS, JR., J.

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CAMPOS, JR., J.:

For our consideration is a letter-complaint of Atty. Hugolino V. Balayon, Jr., dated October 9, 1991, charging Judge Gaydifredo O. Ocampo of the Metropolitan Trial Court, Tupi, South Cotabato with gross ignorance of the law and grave misconduct. The charge is grounded on eight complaints, separately discussed as follows:

FIRST COMPLAINT:

The first complaint charges respondent Judge with gross ignorance of the law and grave misconduct. The charge arose when one Ronilo Hijastro complained to respondent Judge about a certain Romeo Panes (complainant's client) who allegedly was withholding possession of some sacks of copra from Ronilo Hijastro. Hijastro sought the help of respondent Judge for protection while his dispute with Romeo Panes was on-going. Ronilo Hijastro was not interested in the services of a lawyer. What respondent Judge did was to write one Lt. Sulam, the Police Station Commander of Tupi, South Cotabato, to wit:

"December 7, 1989

Dear Lt. Sulam,

Bearer went to me for legal advice affecting the sacks of copras and other produce of the land in possession by Mr. Ronilo Hijastro but who appears to be an illegitimate son of the late Mr. Juan Panes.

Mr. Romeo Panes is allegedly claiming the land and its produce as brother of Mr. Juan Panes. Romeo has no right on it as he has no papers on the land notwithstanding being a brother of Juan Panes.

So, if Romeo shall force Ronilo or his tenant on the land to give the produce and possession of the land, your Office can lend assistance to Mr. Ronilo Hijastro.

Thanks.

(SGD.) JUDGE GAYDIFREDO OCAMPO"[1]

Complainant contends that what respondent Judge did amounts to private practice which is in conflict with his position of being a municipal judge. Complainant further accuses respondent Judge of using his influence as incumbent Judge to pressure the Police Station Commander as a result of which the sacks of copra were sold with respondent Judge reportedly having been given a share in the proceeds.

In his Comment, respondent Judge admits having written the aforequoted letter, but vehemently denies the express insinuations by complainant of any ulterior motive on his part. He does not personally know said Ronilo Hijastro as that was the first time respondent Judge met him in his sala. He advised him to see a counsel who could lend him legal assistance on any proper case that may be filed, if he so desired, but Hijastro, according to

him, just wanted police assistance. While he might have fallen short of using his discretion in writing the letter, he contends that he did the same in full and absolute good faith. He denies having gotten a share of the sale of the sacks of copra.

We do not find respondent Judge guilty of grave misconduct: In the case of *Babatio vs. Tan*,^[2] this Court ruled that "(f)or serious misconduct to exist, there must be reliable evidence showing that the judicial acts complained of were corrupt or inspired by an intention to violate the law, or were in persistent disregard of all well-known legal rules".

In the case at bar, although respondent Judge admitted having written the letter dated December 7, 1989, there is no showing that he did so with the intention to violate the law. Neither is the charge that he was reportedly given a share of the sale substantiated. Mere suspicion without proof cannot be a basis for conviction. It should be pointed out, however, that under Canon 2 of the Code of Judicial Conduct, a judge should avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in all activities. Hence, respondent Judge is advised to conduct himself accordingly.

SECOND COMPLAINT:

On January 4, 1990, a Criminal Complaint for Qualified Theft as Principals and Accessories After-the-Fact, docketed as Criminal Case No. 5016 entitled, "*People vs. Mario Sanso, Fernando Mangubat and Tony Joven*", was filed by Lt. Sulam before respondent Judge's sala.

Tony Joven was charged as an accessory after-the-fact for allegedly having bought two (2) piglets which were the proceeds of the crime.

On the same date, Lt. Sulam filed an application for search warrant attaching thereto the affidavit of one Mario Lim as witness. Respondent Judge took the sworn statements of Lt. Sulam and Mario Lim and on the basis thereof issued the search warrant.

The implementation of the search warrant resulted in the seizure of two piglets found at Tony Joven's backyard. Thereafter, respondent Judge issued a warrant of arrest against Tony Joven who was later arrested and imprisoned but was released after posting the necessary bail.

It was only after his release that Tony Joven engaged the legal services of complainant.

On January 29, 1990, complainant filed an Urgent Motion to Quash Search Warrant and Warrant of Arrest alleging that the same were illegally issued on the ground that the applicant and his witness have no personal knowledge of the facts and circumstances which formed the basis for the issuance of said warrants. Hence, in violation of his client's constitutional rights.

On February 16, 1990, respondent Judge issued a resolution annulling the subject search warrant and the proceedings held thereon after finding that the applicant and his witness did not have the personal knowledge as required by law. With respect to the warrant of arrest, the same stood. Respondent Judge scheduled the arraignment and trial of complainant's client.

Complainant charges respondent Judge for alleged illegal issuance of a search warrant and warrant of arrest.

In his Comment, respondent Judge contends that: "Notwithstanding the fact that the respondent in its resolution x x x quashed the said search warrant, it does not mean that the (same was) at the outset illegally and improvidently issued as it found a basis for its issuance as aforesated. The said resolution was accomplished not solely on the basis of the said motion of complainant x x x but on the inherent power of the Court to amend its orders and processes to conform to law and justice. Besides, the resolution of respondent speaks for itself. Affecting the

warrant of arrest which the complainant argued should have been cancelled also together with the search warrant, respondent does not find basis in his judicial discretion to do so. Complainant's allegation of gross ignorance of law on the part of respondent is therefore only his self-serving assertions of his personal view."[3]

Respondent Judge further states that after complainant filed his said Urgent Motion, he inhibited himself from continuing with the further proceedings of this case in the exercise of his sound discretion. He added that the subject case had long been terminated by the Judge designated by Executive Judge Rodolfo Soledad, RTC, Marbel, South Cotabato.

Complainant failed to show that there was malice or bad faith on the part of respondent Judge in issuing the subject warrants.

Every court has the power and indeed the duty to review and amend or reverse its findings and conclusions when its attention is timely called to any error or defect therein.[4] In the case at bar, the motion to quash the search warrant and warrant of arrest filed by complainant was favorably considered by respondent Judge which resulted in the quashal of the search warrant. The non-quashal of the warrant of arrest was due to the fact that complainant's client has already posted bail. Absent any showing that respondent Judge acted with malice or bad faith in the issuance of the subject warrants, the presumption is that official duty has been regularly performed by him.

THIRD COMPLAINT:

On December 4, 1990, a Criminal Complaint for Theft, docketed as Criminal Case No. 5123, entitled, "People vs. Norberto Solis and Jose Catapang", was filed by Lt. Sulam on the basis of the sworn statements of two prosecution witnesses, namely, Antonio Dacayo and Buenaventura Condova, against Jose Catapang and Norberto Solis accusing them of stealing pineapples belonging to DOLEFIL plantation before the respondent Judge's court.

Although respondent Judge was satisfied that there existed probable cause based on the sworn statements of the prosecution witnesses, on December 20, 1990, respondent Judge conducted a summary clarificatory examination of Romulo Severino, a jeepney driver, and one of the accused, Jose Catapang. Thereafter, respondent Judge issued a warrant of arrest against Jose Catapang and Norberto Solis.

On January 15, 1991, as shown in the return of the warrant of arrest, Jose Catapang was arrested and detained at the municipal jail of Tupi. Norberto Solis was at large.

On January 23, 1991, the case was called for arraignment but was postponed since the accused had no counsel. Complainant was appointed as his counsel-de-officio.

On February 11, 1991, complainant filed an Urgent Motion for Postponement of the arraignment.

On February 12, 1991, accused posted bail and was released.

On February 21, 1991, Jose Catapang, with the assistance of complainant, was arraigned and pleaded not guilty. After the arraignment, complainant manifested that he was filing a Motion to Dismiss.

On March 5, 1991, complainant filed an Urgent Motion to Dismiss on the ground that the arrest of complainant's client was unlawful.

On March 6, 1991, respondent Judge issued an Order dismissing the case.

On March 19, 1991, private prosecutor filed a Motion for Reconsideration of the Order of Dismissal.

Per Order of the same date, respondent Judge reconsidered his Order of dismissal.

On April 2, 1991, respondent Judge reiterated his previous Order of dismissal.

Private prosecutor filed with the RTC a petition for certiorari which was pending resolution at the time this complaint was filed.

Complainant comes to this Court charging respondent Judge with gross ignorance of the law in ordering the arrest of accused Jose Catapang on mere suspicion, hence, resulting in the illegal arrest and arbitrary detention of the accused because the sworn statements of the two prosecution witnesses were not based on their personal knowledge of facts and circumstances. Neither did the clarificatory examinations conducted by respondent Judge on Romulo Severino and Jose Catapang point to the accused as the persons who stole the pineapples.

Again, there is no showing that malice or bad faith attended the issuance of the warrant of arrest by the respondent Judge.

As earlier mentioned, every court has the power and indeed the duty to amend or reverse its findings and conclusions when its attention is timely called to any error or defect therein.[5] Let it be noted, though, that this is the second complaint charging respondent Judge of issuing a search warrant and/or warrant of arrest in violation of the requirement of personal knowledge of the facts and circumstances by the applicant and his witnesses. This does not speak well of respondent Judge's appreciation and application of the law. It would be beneficial for both respondent Judge and those whose cases would fall within his jurisdiction, if respondent updated himself with the law and the latest jurisprudence.

Respondent Judge is admonished to exercise more prudence and circumspection in the issuance of the aforementioned warrants so as not to trample on the rights as guaranteed by the Constitution.

FOURTH COMPLAINT:

The complaint states that respondent Judge, with gross ignorance of the law, allowed a witness to testify during the trial without previously submitting his affidavit as required under Section 14 of the Rules on Summary Procedure.[6]

In *People vs. Esther Ante*, Criminal Case No. 5226 for Slight Physical Injuries, a prosecution witness who had not previously submitted his affidavit was allowed by respondent Judge to testify during the trial, over and above the objection of complainant. Complainant alleged that Section 14 of the Rules on Summary Procedure expressly prohibits any witness, without exception, from testifying during the trial without previously submitting his affidavit, citing the case of *Gonzales vs. Presiding Judge of Branch 1, RTC of Bohol*. [7]

In *Orino vs. Judge Gervasio*, [8] the Supreme Court ruled in a Minute Resolution that even if a witness has not priorly submitted his/her affidavit, he may be called to testify in connection with a specific factual matter relevant to the issue. Thus, a medical doctor whose medical certificate is among the evidence on record may be called to testify. This also applies to a Register of Deeds or Provincial Assessor in connection with official documents issued by his office. Respondent Judge may not therefore be held guilty of ignorance of the law.

FIFTH COMPLAINT:

The complaint alleges that respondent Judge continuously notarized documents not connected with the exercise of his official functions and thus earning extra money out of the same, even if there were two duly commissioned notaries public in the municipality, contrary to the Resolution of the Court En Banc dated December 19, 1989.

In his Comment, respondent Judge contends that the power of the MTC and MCTC Judges to act as notaries public ex-officio, contained in Circular No. 1-90 dated February 26, 1990, was received by him on March 30,

1990.

Respondent Judge vehemently denies the alleged continuous notarization. He admits that he had notarized six documents in 1990 and three documents in 1991. The aforesaid documents were notarized by respondent Judge by reason of the unavailability of notaries public and the urgent need by the parties therein. The fees thereon were paid to the Government as certified to by the Clerk of Court.[9]

Respondent Judge admits that there are two lawyers and notaries public in his station at Tupi. They are Atty. Neptali Solilapsi and the herein complainant. Although Atty. Solilapsi is a resident of Tupi and with a law office thereat, he is rarely present by reason of almost daily appearances in the courts of the province of South Cotabato and General Santos City, not to mention his occasional trips to Manila. On the other hand, herein complainant, although residing in Tupi holds a law office at Marbel, South Cotabato and goes home late in the afternoon or evening. They are therefore not in a position to render regular legal services that may be asked of them in Tupi.

The 1989 Code of Judicial Conduct not only enjoins judges to regulate their extra-judicial activities in order to minimize the risk of conflict with their judicial duties, but also prohibits them from engaging in the private practice of law.[10]

It is well settled that municipal judges may not engage in notarial work except as notaries public ex-officio. As notaries public ex-officio, they may engage only in the notarization of documents connected with the exercise of their official functions. They may not, as such notaries public ex-officio, undertake the preparation and acknowledgment of private documents, contracts and other acts of conveyance, which bear no relation to the performance of their functions as judges.

However, taking judicial notice of the fact that there are still municipalities which have neither lawyers nor notaries public, the Supreme Court ruled that MTC and MCTC judges assigned to municipalities or circuits with no lawyers or notaries public may, in their capacity as notaries public ex-officio, 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 and (2) certification be made in the notarized documents attesting to the lack of any lawyer or notary public in such municipality or circuit.[11]

In the case at bar, there are two notaries public in respondent's station at Tupi. That these two notaries public do not appear to be stationed regularly at Tupi, as respondent Judge claims, does not suffice to qualify under the exception. It is only when there are no lawyers or notaries public that the exception applies.

For the unauthorized notarization of nine private documents, respondent Judge is hereby ordered to pay the fine of TEN THOUSAND PESOS (P10,000.00) with a warning that the commission of similar acts in the future will warrant a more severe sanction.[12]

SIXTH COMPLAINT:

On May 15, 1989, a Criminal Complaint for grave threats against Joe Maliang was filed with the respondent Judge's sala. After the submission of the affidavits and counter-affidavits, respondent Judge rendered a decision dated October 4, 1989 convicting the accused of light threats as defined and penalized under Article 285, paragraph 2 of the Revised Penal Code. On October 16, 1989, accused appealed to the Regional Trial Court, 11th Judicial Region, Branch 25, Koronadal, South Cotabato. The Regional Trial Court rendered its decision dated July 19, 1990 reversing the respondent Judge and acquitting the accused on reasonable doubt.

Complainant now contends that with the acquittal of his client in the grave threats case, respondent Judge had shown his utter lack of correct appreciation of evidence. It is also a manifestation of respondent Judge's habit of

deciding cases on his own personal view and not based on the evidence adduced.

There is no showing that respondent Judge decided the case in bad faith. It will be noted that complainant's client was acquitted on reasonable doubt. Hence, there was evidence indicating that he committed the crime but that the evidence presented by the prosecution was not enough to convict complainant's client beyond reasonable doubt.

In the case of *Vda. de Zabal vs. Pamaran*,^[13] this Court had the occasion to pronounce that mere errors in the appreciation of evidence, unless so gross and patent as to produce an inference of ignorance or bad faith, or that the judge knowingly rendered an unjust decision are irrelevant and immaterial in an administrative proceeding against him.

SEVENTH COMPLAINT:

A letter-complaint^[14] for theft, dated July 2, 1991, was filed by Rodolfo L. Lizada, in his capacity as Tupi Municipal Agrarian Reform Officer, against Feliciano Angeles, et. al. This was based on the alleged illegal taking by the accused of the galvanized iron roofing sheets of a government warehouse. Attached to the letter-complaint were the affidavits and sworn statements of witnesses.^[15]

On July 17, 1991, respondent Judge conducted an ocular inspection and found the following:

1. The galvanized iron roofings of the government warehouse were indeed missing.
2. A total of eighty-eight used galvanized iron sheets were found in the premises of accused Feliciano Angeles. He was not around when the inspection team arrived.
3. Feliciano Angeles' wife was present during the inspection. She informed the members of the inspection team that five of the used galvanized iron sheets were used in roofing their house. However, when Feliciano Angeles arrived, he corrected his wife's statement, saying that a total of eight was instead used by them.

On August 6, 1991, respondent Judge issued a resolution dismissing the case and remanded the records thereof to the Office of the Provincial Prosecutor at Marbel, South Cotabato.

In dismissing the case, the respondent Judge ruled as follows:

"For all these acts of the accused, the Court does not find a prima facie case for Theft. The elements of Theft are clear and firm. All must be present. Intent to gain as one of its basic elements was not satisfactorily established as the subject GI sheets were not taken away from the premises but rather found and kept therein by the accused for cogent reason of prevailing theivery (sic) at the place which the prosecution did not dispute. The Court neither finds a case for malicious mischief as assuming a damage was caused by the accused, there is no evidence that he deliberately and maliciously removed the GI sheet roofings of the subject bodega but rather he did it with cogent reason as herein before stated. The liability of the accused, if any, is civil in nature. The private complainant has other provisional remedies to protect its interest."^[16]

In this seventh complaint, respondent Judge is being charged with gross ignorance of the law and grave abuse of discretion. Complainant alleges that respondent Judge abused his discretion in dismissing the case for theft and had no jurisdiction in ruling that no malicious mischief was committed considering that the case at bar was for theft and that another one for malicious mischief was pending in his sala. Complainant further accuses respondent Judge of having dismissed the case on the ground that one of the accused, Normita Cornejo, is the daughter-in-law of respondent Judge's good friend.

A reading of the ocular inspection report shows that all the elements of theft are present in the case. Contrary to respondent Judge's basis for dismissal, the element of intent to gain was present therein. The wife of the accused admitted having used five galvanized iron sheets for their house. This was reiterated by the accused Feliciano

Angeles that not only five, but eight galvanized iron sheets, were appropriated for their house. Hence, the dismissal of the case was not proper. However, complainant still has the remedy of review by the provincial fiscal.

Although a judge may not always be subjected to disciplinary action for an error of judgment or lack of awareness of the appropriate legal rules, that does not mean that he should not exercise due care in performing his adjudicatory prerogatives. He should study the principles of law and be diligent in endeavoring to ascertain the facts.[17]

Respondent Judge is therefore admonished to exercise more prudence and circumspection in the performance of his duties as municipal judge.

EIGHTH COMPLAINT:

A Criminal Complaint for Theft docketed, as Criminal Case No. 5180, entitled, "People vs. Julio Relativo and Miller Estigoy", was filed before respondent Judge's sala charging accused of stealing coconut trees.

After the prosecution had rested its case, complainant, as defense counsel, instead of presenting his evidence, filed a Demurrer to the Evidence on June 4, 1991 alleging that the private complainant in said case had no legal personality to sue because he was no longer the owner of the land where the coconut trees were stolen, having failed to redeem the land from the Development Bank of the Philippines.

An Opposition to Demurrer to the Evidence, dated June 4, 1991, was filed by the prosecution.

On June 18, 1991, respondent Judge issued an Order denying the said Demurrer to the Evidence.

On June 29, 1991, complainant filed an Urgent Motion for Reconsideration.

On July 1, 1991, the prosecution was ordered to file its Comment on the Urgent Motion for Reconsideration.

On July 11, 1991, the prosecution filed its Comment and Opposition to the Urgent Motion for Reconsideration.

On July 17, 1991, the Motion for Reconsideration was denied by respondent Judge.

On August 12, 1991, complainant filed a Special Action for Certiorari with the Regional Trial Court contending that respondent Judge committed grave abuse of discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction in denying complainant's Demurrer to the Evidence.

Complainant now charges respondent Judge with gross ignorance of the law and/or grave misconduct in denying his Demurrer to the Evidence.

The charge of gross ignorance of the law and/or grave misconduct has no factual basis. Not every error of judgment can be attributable to a judge's ignorance of the law. Until the alleged error shall have been properly raised on appeal and resolved by the proper appellate court, it is generally premature to say that the error was due to the Judge's ignorance of the law.[18]

Judicial action on a motion to dismiss or demurrer to the evidence is left to the exercise of sound judicial discretion. Unless there is a grave abuse thereof, amounting to lack of jurisdiction, the trial court's denial of a motion to dismiss may not be disturbed.[19]

It will be noted that complainant had already filed a petition for certiorari with the Regional Trial Court.

IN SUMMARY, We resolved the eight complaints filed against respondent Judge as follows:

FIRST COMPLAINT: Under Canon 2 of the 1989 Code of Judicial Conduct, respondent Judge should avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in all his activities. While respondent Judge was found to have written the police station Commander of Tupi, South Cotabato in good faith, he should refrain from engaging in such activity, and other similar ones, so as not to tarnish the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary.

SECOND COMPLAINT: There is no basis for the charge against respondent Judge of improperly issuing search warrant and a warrant of arrest in relation to Criminal Case No. 5016. The issuance was not attended with malice or bad faith. The complaint is therefore hereby dismissed.

THIRD COMPLAINT: This being the second complaint against respondent Judge for alleged issuance of a search warrant and/or a warrant of arrest in Criminal Case No. 5123 in violation of the requirement of personal knowledge, respondent Judge is hereby admonished to exercise more circumspection and prudence in the issuance of the said warrants so as not to unwittingly trample on the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the accused.

FOURTH COMPLAINT: This complaint is dismissed. We hold respondent Judge not guilty of ignorance of the law when he allowed a witness to testify despite his non-submission of an affidavit. This is well within the Rules on Summary Procedure.

FIFTH COMPLAINT: For the unauthorized notarization of nine private documents, respondent Judge is fined TEN THOUSAND PESOS (P10,000.00) with warning that the commission of similar acts in the future will warrant a more severe sanction.

SIXTH COMPLAINT: This complaint is dismissed. That respondent Judge's decision of convicting accused in a criminal complaint for light threats was reversed on appeal on reasonable doubt is not an indication of respondent Judge's lack of correct appreciation of facts. A mere error in judgment is immaterial in an administrative complaint against a judge absent any showing of bad faith.

SEVENTH COMPLAINT: There is enough evidence to hold respondent Judge remiss in the performance of his duties as municipal judge when he dismissed a criminal case for theft filed with his sala for preliminary investigation despite his own finding that there was intent to gain on the part of the accused when they appropriated the galvanized iron sheets. Thus, respondent Judge is again admonished to exercise more prudence and circumspection in the performance of his duties as municipal judge.

EIGHTH COMPLAINT: The denial of a demurrer to the evidence is left to the sound discretion of the Court, rather than an indication of ignorance of the law. It was well within the respondent Judge's discretion, absent any showing of bad faith or excess of jurisdiction, for him to have denied complainant's Demurrer to the Evidence in Criminal Case No. 5180. The complaint is therefore dismissed.

SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, C.J., (Chairman), Gutierrez, Jr., Cruz, Feliciano, Padilla, Bidin, Griño-Aquino, Regalado, Davide Jr., Romero, Nocon, Bellosillo, and Melo, JJ., concur.

[1] Annex "A" of Letter-Complaint.

[2] A.M. No. 265-MJ, 157 SCRA 277 (1988).

[3] Comment, p.3.

[4] Luzon Brokerage Corporation vs. Court of Appeals, 176 SCRA 483 (1989).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Now Sec. 15 of the Revised Rules on Summary Procedure.

[7] 186 SCRA 101 (1990).

[8] G.R. No. 76058, November 3, 1986.

[9] Annex 5 of Comment.

[10] Canon 5 and Rule 5.07.

[11] A.M. No. 89-11-1303 MTC Re: Request for clarification on the power of municipal trial court judges to act as Notaries Public Ex-Officio.

[12] Macias vs. Pacana, Adm. Case No. 3048, 198 SCRA 13 (1991).

[13] Adm. case No. 200-J, 39 SCRA 430 (1971), cited in Ramirez vs. Corpuz-Macandog, A.M. No. R-351-RTJ, 144 SCRA 462 (1986).

[14] Annex "AA".

[15] Annexes "BB", "CC", "DD", "EE" of Complaint.

[16] Annex "GG-1" of Complaint.

[17] Revita vs. Rimando, A.M. No. 1439-MJ, 98 SCRA 619 (1980).

[18] Cabantac vs. Judge Baz, Jr., A.M. No. RTJ-88-164, April 14, 1988, Minute Resolution.

[19] People vs. Mercado, 159 SCRA 453 (1988).

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