

**ENRICA B. AGUIRRE AND NENITA A. DELA CRUZ, COMPLAINANTS,
VS. JUDGE CANDIDO R. BELMONTE, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT,
BRANCH 22, MALOLOS, BULACAN, RESPONDENT.**

A.M. No. RTJ-93-1052. October 27, 1994

Ponente: REGALADO, J.

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REGALADO, J.:

The instant administrative matter stems from a verified complaint of herein complainants Enrica B. Aguirre and Nenita A. dela Cruz, dated July 22, 1993, against Judge Candido R. Belmonte of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 22, Malolos, Bulacan, for gross ignorance of the law, evident partiality and dishonesty in the performance of his duties.

Complainants were the offended parties in two criminal cases for murder, both entitled "People of the Philippines vs. Estelita Hipolito, et al.," docketed as Criminal Cases Nos. 1024-M-91 and 1025-M-91, filed with the Regional Trial Court of Malolos, Bulacan and respectively raffled to Branches 20 and 22 thereof.

Accused Estelita Hipolito, together with ten others, were indicted for the ambush-slaying on March 2, 1988 of then Officer-in-Charge Bernardo Aguirre of San Jose del Monte and his driver, Avelino dela Cruz. Judge Nicasio Bartolome of the Municipal Trial Court of Sta. Maria, Bulacan, conducted the preliminary investigation and, after finding the existence of probable cause, ordered the arrest of all the accused with no bail fixed for their provisional liberty. The Office of the Provincial Prosecutor, on review, ordered the release of the accused in the belief that there was no probable cause. On appeal to the Department of Justice, the latter found that, except for one of the accused, there was reasonable ground to hold all of them for trial and accordingly directed the Office of the Provincial Prosecutor to file the corresponding informations with no bail recommended.

Two informations for murder were then filed in the Regional Trial Court of Malolos, Bulacan and were docketed therein as Criminal Cases Nos. 1024-M-91 and 1025-M-91, respectively, the latter case being raffled to Branch 22 presided over by respondent judge.

Complainants allege, and most of their allegations find support in the records, that since the two informations arose from one and the same incident, respondent directed the consolidation of the two cases in his branch even without any motion therefor being filed by either the accused or the prosecution. After the consolidation was effected, in his order of June 18, 1991 respondent judge directed the issuance of warrants of arrest against the accused. At the same time and on his own motion, he also authorized their provisional release on bail, which he set at P100,000.00 for every accused in each criminal charge.[1] Pursuant thereto, the accused posted their bail bonds, were then arraigned, and thereafter went to trial.

As the Office of the Provincial Prosecutor of Bulacan was ordered disqualified by the Department of Justice to prosecute the aforementioned cases, at the instance of the offended parties a state prosecutor was designated as acting provincial prosecutor. This state prosecutor, for one reason or another, repeatedly failed to appear during the trial, prompting respondent judge to issue an order on August 18, 1992[2] for the provisional dismissal of the

two cases notwithstanding the presence of the private prosecutor and the fact that a witness was then undergoing cross-examination. On motion of the prosecution, however, the cases were reinstated. The accused later sought the reconsideration of this reinstatement on the ground that the provisional dismissal of the cases although with their consent was tantamount to an acquittal, there being a violation of their right to a speedy trial. Respondent found merit in the contentions of the accused and granted their motion for reconsideration in an order dated December 15, 1992.[3]

Meanwhile, another state prosecutor was designated in place of the first one who had been appointed to the judiciary. The new designee filed a motion for respondent's inhibition and another motion for reconsideration of the order dismissing the two cases. The motion for inhibition was granted by respondent judge and the cases were re-raffled to Branch 16 of the Regional Trial Court of Malolos, Bulacan presided over by Judge Andres S. Maligaya.[4]

On this state of things, complainants have come to us, impugning the orders of respondent, berating his actuations, and seeking his dismissal from the service. On September 15, 1993, this Court required respondent to comment on the aforementioned complaint[5] and, after he was furnished a copy of the same, he submitted his answer dated November 26, 1993.[6]

While respondent admits the factual antecedents as mentioned in the complaint, he submits that insofar as the consolidation of the cases is concerned, it was Judge Amante M. Laforteza of Branch 20 who transferred Criminal Case No. 1025-M-91 to his sala in an order dated June 14, 1991.[7] Moreover, he avers that the consolidation of related cases to the branch bearing the lower number is a common practice.

Respondent contends that he granted bail to the accused based on our "Decision entitled 'Vicente Lim, et al.,' (sic) G.R. No. 94054-57 dated February 19, 1991, requiring and empowering the Judge to study the evidence before him before issuing a warrant of arrest." [8] From this he argues "that the obligation to go over the evidence necessarily carries with it the right to refuse to issue the warrant w(h)ere he disagrees with the finding of the prosecutor who filed the information." Under that premise, he concluded "that if he can legally refuse to issue a warrant, he must necessarily have the power to reduce or give bail, even without hearing and even without any motion (for) bail being filed. This is on the theory that the whole is bigger than its parts. The whole here is to refuse to issue the warrant, the parts being to grant or reduce bail." [9]

He then asseverates that before the Lim case, there was absolutely no evidence submitted from which a judge could conclude that the evidence of guilt is not strong, unlike in cases subsequent thereto wherein the evidence of the prosecution is attached to the information, so that the judge can, by studying it, reasonably conclude whether the evidence of guilt is strong, for the denial of bail, or not strong, for the grant or reduction of bail.

He further claims that his order granting bail was not posited on the Rules of Court or the other decisions of this Court "requiring petition for bail, no bail and hearing on bail" which he did not consider applicable, but on the decision of this Court in the Lim case. It was supposedly only much later when he read in the newspapers about the Court's warning to judges against granting bail in capital offenses without hearing that he realized that he could have made a mistake.

Respondent also explains that while many witnesses were mentioned in the information, only one was a relevant witness, a policeman who claimed to have been a bodyguard of one of the accused and had allegedly heard conversations of the accused at one time or another wherein they conspired to kill the victims. Respondent avers that he found it hard to believe that a bodyguard who is not part of the conspiracy would be so privileged or trusted as to be allowed to hear and witness said conversations and/or actuations on conspiracy to kill without being inculpated in the plan so as to silence him.

In any event, he submits that any error on his part in interpreting this Court's ruling in the Lim case was deemed corrected when the prosecution did not file any motion to cancel the bail he had granted, nor any motion for clarification if, indeed, his aforesaid order granting bail was improper.

On the provisional dismissal of the cases against two of the accused, respondent asserts that the same was premised on the constitutional right of the accused to a speedy trial and was occasioned by the frequent absences of the state prosecutor, resulting in the cancellation of the hearings and causing undue hardship on the defense lawyers coming from Metro Manila. This caused him to issue an order on July 22, 1992 citing the state prosecutor for contempt. The presence of the private prosecutor was of no moment, considering that no valid hearing could be had without the presence of the public prosecutor. The fact that a witness was still under cross-examination at that time was only a minor technicality.

Lastly, he professes that, contrary to complainants' allegations, the motion for reconsideration of his order of December 15, 1992 which, it may be recalled, declared the order dismissing the cases against two accused as equivalent to an acquittal and not merely a provisional dismissal, had already been denied by Branch 16 of the same court to which the cases had been re-raffled, thereby upholding his aforesaid order.

There being no serious dispute on or controversion of the facts of this administrative matter as would affect our disposition thereof, pursuant to revised Rule 140 the Court resolved on June 15, 1994 to refer the matter to the Office of the Court Administrator for evaluation, report and recommendation.[10] Deputy Court Administrator Reynaldo L. Suarez thereafter submitted to the Court his memorandum dated August 5, 1994.[11]

The resolution of the instant proceeding hinges on the legal propriety of the orders issued by respondent regarding the consolidation of the two murder cases in Branch 22, the granting of bail *motu proprio* to the accused, and the subsequent dismissal, which was later declared to be in fact an acquittal, with regard to accused Estelita Hipolito and Alfredo Bolsico in both cases.

After a thorough review of the records of this administrative matter and the memorandum thereon, we find that the consolidation of the two murder cases in Branch 22 presided over by respondent was proper. As respondent correctly explained, it was Judge Amante M. Laforteza of Branch 20 of the court below who ordered the consolidation of the cases pursuant to a motion therefor of counsel for the accused in one of the cases.[12] The case assigned to Branch 22 had the lower docket number, hence it was properly consolidated therein.

Anent the issue on the *sua sponte* grant of bail, without any motion or application therefor by any of the accused and without any notice to the prosecution or any hearing conducted therein, complainants have valid cause to complain. The fundamental law on bail as found in Section 13, Article III of the 1987 Constitution provides:

"All persons, except those charged with offenses punishable by reclusion perpetua when evidence of guilt is strong, shall, before conviction, be bailable by sufficient sureties or be released on recognizance as may be provided by law." x x x."

Complementary thereto, Section 3, Rule 114 of the governing 1985 Rules on Criminal Procedure,[13] as amended, reiterated that:

"All persons in custody shall, before final conviction, be entitled to bail as a matter of right, except those charged with a capital offense or an offense which, under the law at the time of its commission and at the time of the application for bail, is punishable by reclusion perpetua, when evidence of guilt is strong."

A capital offense is defined as an offense which, under the law existing at the time of its commission, and at the time of the application to be admitted to bail, may be punished with death.[14] The grant of bail, therefore, becomes a matter of discretion if the accused is charged with a capital offense. In order to determine whether bail

should be granted or withheld, the court must necessarily satisfy itself whether or not the evidence of guilt is strong, and the order granting or refusing the same should contain a summary of the evidence presented by the prosecution.[15]

In the present administrative matter, the accused were charged with murder, a capital offense, in two cases. Hence, the issue of whether or not they should be admitted to bail lies on the strength of the prosecution's evidence as to their guilt. The question to be resolved now, in view of the submissions of respondent judge, is whether in the determination of the strength of the evidence of guilt, the trial judge should first conduct a hearing or just rely on whatever documentary evidence is attached to the information or appears in the record of the case before him. This is not a novel question.

In *Libarios vs. Dabalos*,[16] Judge Rosarito F. Dabalos granted provisional liberty to two of the accused on a bail of P50,000.00 each on the ground that they were not charged as co-principals by cooperation or inducement, and that the evidence of guilt against them was merely circumstantial. It was argued therein that Section 5, Rule 114 of the 1985 Rules on Criminal Procedure which requires a hearing of an application for admission to bail is applicable only to cases where the accused is already in custody.

In rejecting his arguments, the Court held that:

"It has been an established legal principle or rule that in cases where a person is accused of a capital offense, the trial court must conduct a hearing in a summary proceeding, to allow the prosecution an opportunity to present, within a reasonable time, all evidence it may desire to produce to prove that the evidence of guilt against the accused is strong, before resolving the issue of bail for the temporary release of the accused. Failure to conduct a hearing before fixing bail in the instant case amounted to a violation of due process. Irrespective of respondent judge's opinion that the evidence of guilt against herein accused is not strong, the law and settled jurisprudence demanded that a hearing be conducted before bail was fixed for the temporary release of accused Calo, Jr. and Allocod, if bail was at all justified. Respondent judge's disregard of an established rule of law by depriving the prosecution of the opportunity to prove that the evidence of guilt against the accused was strong, amounted to gross ignorance of the law, which is subject to disciplinary action."

In the more recent case of *Borinaga vs. Tamin*,[17] an amended criminal complaint for murder was filed before the municipal circuit trial court for preliminary investigation. While the case was pending with the said court still on preliminary investigation, a petition for bail was filed by the accused in the regional trial court. Pursuant to this petition, respondent Judge Camilo E. Tamin set the case for hearing. On the scheduled date of hearing, the public prosecutor failed to appear, presumably because no information had yet been filed in the trial court, but respondent judge nonetheless issued an order granting bail to the accused.

In the meantime, the municipal circuit trial court which conducted the preliminary investigation issued a resolution recommending the filing of an information for murder against the accused, which resolution was affirmed by the provincial prosecutor. As a consequence thereof, an information for murder was filed against all the accused, with no bail recommended. Subsequently, the public prosecutor therein filed a motion for the cancellation of the bail and the arrest of the accused on the ground that the accused was charged with a capital offense, the evidence of guilt was strong, and no bail was recommended in the information. Respondent judge, however, issued an order denying said motion without conducting a hearing thereon.

Repudiating his acts, this Court held:

"x x x (B)ail is a matter of discretion where the accused is charged with a capital offense or an offense punishable by reclusion perpetua and the evidence of guilt is strong.

x x x

"x x x, (W)here admission to bail is a matter of discretion, the prosecution has the burden of showing that evidence of guilt is strong. x x x (A)dmision to bail as a matter of discretion presupposes the exercise thereof in accordance with law and guided by the applicable legal principles. The prosecution must first be accorded an opportunity to present evidence because by the very nature of deciding applications for bail, it is on the basis of such evidence that judicial discretion is weighed against in determining whether the guilt of the accused is strong. In other words, discretion must be exercised regularly, legally and within the confines of procedural due process, that is, after evaluation of the evidence submitted by the prosecution. x x x.

x x x

"In the first place, respondent judge did not have the authority to set the petition for bail for hearing in view of the fact that he had not even acquired jurisdiction over the criminal case since the information therefor had not yet been filed in the trial court. In doing so, he acted with grave abuse of discretion and in wanton disregard of established rules and jurisprudence. Secondly, it has been held that even where the prosecutor refuses to adduce evidence in opposition to the application to grant and fix bail, the court may ask the prosecution such questions as would ascertain the strength of the state's evidence or judge the adequacy of the amount of bail. Here, the non-appearance of the prosecution at the hearing scheduled by respondent judge on March 30, 1992 was obviously justified since, to repeat, respondent had no authority to schedule and/or conduct the same."

In the aforecited case of *Lim, Sr., et al. vs. Felix, et al.*, the primary issue was whether or not a judge may issue a warrant of arrest by simply relying on the prosecutor's certification or recommendation that a probable cause exists. The Court resolved the issue following established doctrines and procedures that a judge, in personally determining the existence of probable cause, is not required to personally examine the complainant and his witnesses. Rather, he may personally evaluate the certification as well as the supporting documents submitted by the prosecutor regarding the existence of probable cause and, on the basis thereof, issue a warrant of arrest; or if, on the basis thereof, he finds no probable cause, he may disregard the prosecutor's report and require the submission of supporting affidavits of witnesses to aid him in arriving at a conclusion as to the existence of probable cause.

Whether wittingly or unwittingly, respondent's reliance on the *Lim* case is sorely misplaced. He could not have failed to apprehend that what was involved therein was the appreciation of evidence initially presented by the prosecution for the determination by the trial court as to whether the filing of an information was justified. What is involved in such a situation is the commencement of a criminal action. The quantum of evidence required therefor is only such evidence as suffices to engender a well founded belief as to the fact of the commission of a crime and the therein respondent's probable guilt thereof.[18]

In contrast, the question of the propriety of the commencement of the criminal actions is not involved herein. The issue, as earlier mentioned, refers to the propriety of the order of respondent issued ex parte which granted bail ex mero motu to the accused who were charged with non-bailable offenses, without said accused having filed a motion therefor, without notice to the prosecution, and without any hearing having been conducted to determine the strength of the prosecution's evidence which involves an evidential quantum different from that required in preliminary investigations. Compounding the responsibility of respondent judge is the fact that the accused were not even in the custody of the law.

We do not subscribe to respondent's supposedly belated realization of the mistake he committed after reading in the newspapers about this Court's warning against the grant of bail in capital offenses without the benefit of a hearing. Even before its pronouncement in the *Lim* case, this Court already ruled in *People vs. Dacudao, etc., et al.*[19] that a hearing is mandatory before bail can be granted to an accused who is charged with a capital offense, in this wise:

"The respondent court acted irregularly in granting bail in a murder case without any hearing on the motion asking for it, without bothering to ask the prosecution for its conformity or comment, as it turned out later, over its strong objections. The court granted bail on the sole basis of the complaint and the affidavits of three policemen, not one of whom apparently witnessed the killing. Whatever the court possessed at the time it issued the questioned ruling was intended only for prima facie determining whether or not there is sufficient ground to engender a well-founded belief that the crime was committed and pinpointing the persons who probably committed it. Whether or not the evidence of guilt is strong for each individual accused still has to be established unless the prosecution submits the issue on whatever it has already presented. To appreciate the strength or weakness of the evidence of guilt, the prosecution must be consulted or heard. It is equally entitled as the accused to due process.

x x x

Certain guidelines in the fixing of a bailbond call for the presentation of evidence and reasonable opportunity for the prosecution to refute it. Among them are the nature and circumstances of the crime, character and reputation of the accused, the weight of the evidence against him, the probability of the accused appearing at the trial, whether or not the accused is a fugitive from justice, and whether or not the accused is under bond in other cases. (Section 6, Rule 114, Rules of Court) It is highly doubtful if the trial court can appreciate these guidelines in an ex-parte determination where the Fiscal is neither present nor heard."

What magnifies the aforementioned procedural misfeasance and nonfeasance of respondent judge is the fact that when he issued his order granting bail, the accused were admittedly still at large. This, of course, he knew as he even had to direct their arrest right in the same order where he simultaneously granted them bail. It is incredible that he could have been unaware that as early as 1961, it was explicitly clarified in *Feliciano vs. Pasicolan, et al.*[20] that since bail is intended to obtain the provisional liberty of the accused, the same cannot be authorized or posted before custody of said accused has been acquired by the judicial authorities by his arrest or voluntary surrender.

It is self-evident that a court cannot authorize provisional liberty to one who is then actually in the enjoyment of his liberty, or as the Court quoted therein, "it would be incongruous to grant bail to one who is free." The pernicious practice which such ruling was intended to prevent, whereby the accused can just send someone to post his bail without recognizing the authority of the court by his personal appearance therein and compliance with the requirements therefor, appears to have been resuscitated by respondent judge.

Respondent postulated that any error he committed in granting bail was deemed corrected by the failure of the prosecution to file in either of the two criminal cases any motion for the cancellation thereof or a clarification of his order. This is a strained and illogical theory. It has long been held that even if the prosecution fails to adduce evidence in opposition to an application for bail of an accused, the court may still require that it answer questions in order to ascertain not only the strength of the state's evidence but also the adequacy of the amount of bail.[21] The same rationale for that doctrine applies to and refutes the aforesaid proposition of respondent.

Clearly, therefore, respondent's act of granting bail to the accused, under the circumstances earlier catalogued and ramified, indubitably amounts to such a whimsical and arbitrary exercise of jurisdiction which calls for this Court's exercise of its disciplinary power. Respondent should be aware that since he is to administer the law and apply it to the facts, he should endeavor diligently to ascertain the facts and the applicable law.[22] A judge owes it to the public and the administration of justice to know the law he is supposed to apply to a given controversy. He is called upon to exhibit more than just a cursory acquaintance with the statutes and procedural rules. There will be faith in the administration of justice only if there be a belief on the part of litigants that the occupants of the bench cannot justly be accused of a deficiency in their grasp of legal principles.[23]

On the issue of the propriety of the respondent's order provisionally dismissing the two murder cases, this Court is not in a position to pass upon its correctness since the records of the instant case do not show the reasons why and the exact number of times the state prosecutor concerned was absent as would justify a dismissal of the criminal cases for the alleged violation of the right to speedy trial of two of the accused. Moreover, the motion for reconsideration of the order of unconditional dismissal of December 15, 1992 is still pending resolution before Branch 16 of the Regional Trial Court of Malolos, Bulacan, contrary to respondent's allegation that the same had already been denied.

Respondent must have been misled by the fact that there were actually two motions for reconsideration for resolution by Branch 16. The first was directed against his order dated March 10, 1992 granting the prosecution's motion for inhibition, while the second motion sought the reconsideration of his order of December 15, 1992 declaring the provisional dismissal against two of the accused in the murder cases as amounting to an acquittal. The first motion was denied by Branch 16 in its order of August 24, 1993 for being moot and academic since the movant was deemed to have recognized the jurisdiction of the court over the case with the filing of several pleadings seeking affirmative relief.[24] The second motion has not yet been resolved and should not be passed upon by the Court in this administrative matter. In any event, the present contents of the record do not clearly show that respondent acted with manifest partiality or culpable duplicity.

In the administrative matters of Libarios and Borinaga which involved virtually the same charges, the erring judges were fined in the amount of P20,000.00. We believe, however, that respondent judge herein should be meted a fine in a higher amount since his actuations complained of in the present proceeding are of a nature graver than those committed in the two cases aforementioned. For, in addition to the errors common to all these three administrative matters as hereinbefore explained, the accused in the criminal cases involved in Libarios and Borinaga had at least filed petitions for their provisional liberty. Here, there was no application for bail filed by any of the accused in either of the two criminal cases hence, as complainants put it, respondent judge was not only the grantor of the bail but likewise the applicant therefor.[25] On top of that, in Borinaga, the accused therein had already been apprehended when he applied for and was granted bail, albeit erroneously. In the present proceeding before us, respondent judge granted bail to the accused who were all at large.

ON THE FOREGOING CONSIDERATIONS, respondent Judge Candido R. Belmonte of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 22, Malolos, Bulacan is hereby ORDERED to pay a FINE of Twenty-Five Thousand Pesos (P25,000.00), with the warning that a repetition of the same or similar acts in the future will be dealt with more severely. Let a copy of this decision be attached to the personal record of said respondent.

SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, C.J., Padilla, Bidin, Davide, Jr., Romero, Bellosillo, Melo, Quiason, Puno, Vitug, Kapunan, and Mendoza, JJ., concur.
Feliciano, J., on leave.

[1] Rollo, 20.

[2] Ibid., 40.

[3] Ibid., 41.

[4] Ibid., 69.

[5] Ibid., 21.

[6] Ibid., 30.

[7] Ibid., 38.

[8] The correct title of the case is Lim, Sr., et al. vs. Felix, et al., G.R. Nos. 94054-57, February 19, 1991, 194 SCRA 292.

[9] Rollo, 33-34.

[10] Rollo, 73.

[11] Ibid., 74.

[12] Ibid., 59.

[13] Rule 114 has been further amended by the Court's resolution of August 16, 1994, which amendments, pursuant to Administrative Circular No. 12-94, took effect on October 1, 1994 and do not affect our disposition of this administrative matter.

[14] Sec. 4, Rule 114, 1985 Rules on Criminal Procedure, as amended.

[15] See Carpio, etc., et al. vs. Maglalang, etc., et al., G.R. No. 78162, April 19, 1991, 196 SCRA 41; People vs. Nano, etc., et al., G.R. No. 94639, January 13, 1992, 205 SCRA 155.

[16] A.M. No. RTJ-89-286, July 11, 1991, 199 SCRA 48.

[17] A.M. No. RTJ-93-936, September 10, 1993, 226 SCRA 206.

[18] Sec. 1, Rule 112, 1985 Rules on Criminal Procedure, as amended.

[19] G.R. No. 81389, February 21, 1989, 170 SCRA 489.

[20] L-14657, July 31, 1961, 2 SCRA 888; see also Manigbas vs. Luna, 98 Phil. 466 (1956); Mendoza vs. Court of First Instance of Quezon, etc., et al., L-35612-14, June 27, 1973, 57 SCRA 369.

[21] Herras Teehankee vs. Director of Prisons, et al., 76 Phil. 756 (1946).

[22] Rule 3.02, Canon 3, Code of Judicial Conduct.

[23] Libarios vs. Dabalos, *supra*.

[24] Annex E; Rollo, 69.

[25] Complaint; *ibid.*, 10.

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