

GILBERT DEE, PETER DEE, ROBERTO UYQUIENCO AND OSCAR BLAZA, PETITIONERS, VS. THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS, JOSE CHUA AND BETTY CHUA, RESPONDENTS.

G.R. No. 111153. November 21, 1994

Ponente: KAPUNAN, J.

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KAPUNAN, J.:

The instant petition for review assails the appellate court's ruling that certiorari lies to order the reinstatement of an information filed before the lower court and later declared withdrawn.

The background facts are as follows:

On March 21, 1990, spouses Jose and Betty Chua (hereinafter referred to as the Chuas) filed a Joint Affidavit/Complaint with the Office of the Prosecutor of Pasay City accusing Gilbert Dee, Peter Dee, Roberto Uyquienco, Oscar Blaza, Hans Sy, Jaime Dy Buncio, Regina Dee, Joaquin Dee, Dy Tiong, Henry Dee Se Gui, Benjamin Yuson, Pilar Liao and Herbert Dee of the crime of estafa through falsification of a commercial document alleging that the latter fraudulently made it appear that they signed a promissory note in the amount of Fourteen Million (P14,000,000.00) Pesos when in fact the said promissory note, signed in blank by them, was executed for the purpose of obtaining a “bills purchase line” not exceeding Two Million (P2,000,000.00) Pesos.

After several months of investigation, First Assistant City Prosecutor Francisco Beron issued a resolution dated September 30, 1991 finding a prima facie case for the filing of an information for estafa.[1]

His findings revealed that:

x x x (It appears that blank promissory notes and blank disclosure statements were signed by complainants Jose and Betty Chua before June 7, 1990; that on June 7, 1990, Jose Chua sent a letter of same date to the China Banking Corporation, attention: Ruben Blasco, manager, and received by the CBC Pasay Branch on the same (sic), requesting for the return to him of the pre-signed blank promissory notes immediately and cancelling the authority given to any officer or employee of the bank to fill up such instruments; that on June 7, 1990, these blank promissory notes were forwarded by then CBC Pasay Branch manager Ruben Blasco to CBC FVD/BRAD; that on July 5, 1990 Oscar Blaza, then the CBC Pasay Branch manager who took over Ruben Blasco's position on the same date, receive an inter-office memo dated July 5, 1990 addressed to him signed by Assistant Vice-President Roberto C. Uyquienco and noted by Honorio Reyes-Lao, First Vice-President and Division Head, SBD II, attached to which was the promissory note as well as the disclosure statement; that Oscar Blaza followed the order in the memo to book the loan which meant they processed the loan and proceeds thereof were used to cover the overdraft balance of Benison Chua; that Oscar Blaza did not inform the Chuas that the loan was already booked; that Oscar Blaza only notified Mr. Chua about the maturity of the loan of P14 million in a letter dated October 17, 1990 denying having ever in the past, now or even at any time borrowed P14 million from CBC.

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It is important to note that the promissory note, which was admittedly signed in blank by complainants, was subsequently dated July 05, 1990, almost a whole month after the letter of complainant Jose L. Chua dated June 07, 1990. The factual existence of the letter withdrawing authority to fill up the promissory note as well as the fact that the letter was duly received by the bank on June 07, 1990 was never disputed. It also bears emphasis that the blank promissory note signed by complainants was admittedly filled up by the employees of China Banking Corporation upon the instruction of respondent Blaza who in turn acted in pursuance of the orders of the Board of Directors and Senior Officers of the Bank.

The foregoing is buttressed by the fact that the promissory note and the disclosure statement on loan/credit transaction form bore the markings "BD-105". When respondent Oscar Blaza was questioned as to what the letters "BD" represented, he responded that it means "Bills Discounting". This clearly corroborates the allegation of the complainants that the real purpose of the blank promissory note was for a Bills Discounting Line.

Furthermore, the allegation of the respondents in their principal defense that the purpose of the pre-signed promissory note was for the liquidation of an alleged overdraft account of the son of the complainant is nebulous. What is evident is the irregularity in the alleged transaction particularly since the bank failed to produce any document which would somewhat or somehow approximate a guaranty agreement. There was none presented. Banks, with their usual meticulous requirements and prepared documentations, are supposed to be always on guard and aware of the requisite formalities of their transactions. Aside from the blank promissory note, the absence of guaranty agreement negates the claim of respondents, specially when considered in light of the large amounts involved in the alleged overdraft of Benison Chua.

With respect to the claim of ignorance by respondent Gilbert U. Dee, the Chairman of the Board of China Banking Corporation, this fact appears to be contrary to the counter-affidavit previously submitted by the said respondent which clearly and explicitly showed his prior knowledge of the questioned transaction. A mere perusal of the counter-affidavit executed by respondent Gilbert U. Dee would readily reveal that as early as June 1990, he was already aware of certain alleged irregularities being committed in China Banking Corporation's Pasay City Branch, the very same alleged irregular transaction which eventually led to the unauthorized insertion and intercalation in the subject blank promissory note previously signed by the Complainants and subject of the letter dated 07 June 1990.

Respondent Oscar Blaza, according to his testimony given during the proceedings conducted by the undersigned on January 28 and 30, 1991, categorically implicated the members of the Board of Directors of China Banking Corporation to the anomalous transaction. In fact, the records show that the unauthorized insertions and intercalations in the pre-signed promissory note were done by the Respondent Oscar Blaza in accordance with the directives of the Respondent Roberto C. Uyquienco on the basis of a purported Board Resolution allegedly passed by the Board of Directors of China Banking Corporation dated 04 July 1990. These were done in contravention of the previous agreement between the parties that the Promissory Note was only for Bills Discounting Line purposes and after the Complainants withdrew the authority from China Banking Corporation to fill-up the same.

Respondents seek to impress upon this Office their pretext that the unauthorized insertion in and filling-up of the blank promissory note was made pursuant to a purported Board Resolution allegedly issued by the Board of Directors of China Banking Corporation on 04 July 1990. Said Board Resolution dated 04 July 1990 was allegedly passed by the Board of Directors of China Banking Corporation on the sole basis of a recommendation made by the Respondent Honorio Reyes-Lao by virtue of an alleged Memorandum made by the latter to the former dated 04 July 1990.

A Circumspect examination of the subject memorandum dated 04 July 1990 would show that the recommendation was for the granting of a "case-to-case clean loan of P13,500,000.00" in favor of the Complainants for the purpose of liquidating the alleged overdraft of the latter's son, Benison Chua. The fact is

that the Complainants never applied for a loan accommodation in the amount of P13,500,000.00. The Respondents failed to substantiate their allegations and no evidence was ever submitted to prove the existence of a loan application by the Complainants. No evidence was introduced by Respondents showing any undertaking by the Complainants to assume the alleged liability of their son Benison Chua. Aside from the fact that the Statute of Frauds requires that such an undertaking to assume another party's liability must be made in writing, it would be inconceivable, if not totally incredulous, for banking institutions to approve transactions of this magnitude without the proper and regular documentation. Furthermore, it would be highly contrary to reason for the Board of Directors of China Banking Corporation to grant a loan accommodation in the amount of P13,500,000.00 to just any party without properly verifying the relevant circumstances surrounding the same. The only logical and evident conclusion is that the Board of Directors were aware of the irregularities and transactions complained of and the plea of ignorance is, therefore, untenable and deserves scant consideration.

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Finally, the existence or non-existence of the alleged overdraft of the son (Benison) of the Complainant is a collateral matter which should be addressed before the proper forum. Indeed, the proper forum is the Regional Trial Court of Makati, Metro Manila (Branch 142) wherein China Banking Corporation already filed a case against Complainants in the case entitled "China Banking Corporation, Plaintiff, vs. Jose L. Chua, et. al., Defendants", docketed as Civil Case No. 90-3015.[2]

As aforesaid, said prosecutor, after finding probable cause to warrant the prosecution of Oscar Blaza, Gilbert Dee, Peter Dee, and Roberto Uyquienco, recommended the filing of an information for the crime of estafa through falsification of commercial document under Article 315 in relation to Articles 171 and 172 of the Revised Penal Code.[3]

Consequently, the corresponding information was filed before the Regional Trial Court in Pasay City on October 3, 1991, docketed as Criminal Case No. 91-1633, and raffled to Branch 113 thereof.[4] The indictment reads:

That on or about the 5th day of July, 1990, in Pasay City, Metro Manila, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, Oscar Blaza, Gilbert Dee, Peter Dee and Roberto C. Uyquienco, being officers of the China Banking Corporation, and having been given by spouses Jose Chua and Betty Chua a promissory note signed in blank by the aforementioned Jose Chua and Betty Chua and given to accused for the express purpose of using the said note in connection with the former's application for "bills purchase line" with the said bank with the understanding that the bank may fill up the blanks only up to Two Million Five Hundred Thousand (P2,500,000.00) Pesos, the maximum amount of the credit line, but said accused, in pursuance of their conspiracy, well knowing that said line was not used at all and was accordingly cancelled, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously, with intent to defraud, falsify said promissory note by making unauthorized insertions, additions and intercalations, thereon, and filling out said promissory note and making it appear that said spouses Jose Chua and Betty Chua promised to pay the China Banking Corporation the sum of P14 Million which in truth and in fact was not actually promised by them, which falsification was precisely done with the wrongful, unlawful, unwarranted, fraudulent and deceitful intent to bind said complainant without legal basis and justification and thereby causing them damage.

Contrary to law.[5]

On October 21, 1991, the accused filed a petition for review with the Department of Justice but the same was denied by the Assistant Chief State Prosecutor ratiocinating that:

Under Department's Circular No. 7 dated January 25, 1990, only resolutions of prosecutors dismissing a criminal complaint are cognizable for review by this Office. While there may be exceptions to the rule, there is

no showing that the case subject of your appeal falls within the excepted cases where there appears that manifest error or grave abuse of discretion has been committed.

Consequently, We resolved to deny your petition.[6]

However, on reconsideration, the petition for review was granted by then Acting Secretary of Justice Silvestre Bello III who set aside the resolution dated September 30, 1991 and directed the City Prosecutor of Pasay to move for the dismissal of the information in Criminal Case No. 91-1633.[7]

On February 3, 1992, the Chuas filed a Motion for Reconsideration of the above-mentioned directive but the same was denied on September 2, 1992.[8]

On September 15, 1992, the subject information was ordered withdrawn by the trial court upon manifestation of Assistant City Prosecutor Manuel A. Ortega that the same has to be withdrawn per the directive of the Acting Department of Justice Secretary.[9]

A Motion for Reconsideration[10] of the above order was filed by the Chuas on September 29, 1992 but the resolution of the same was suspended because they filed a petition for certiorari before the Court of Appeals assailing the resolution of the Department of Justice Secretary[11] on October 14, 1992. Named as respondent parties thereto were Secretary of Justice Franklin Drilon, Assistant Prosecutor Manuel Ortega, as public respondents and Gilbert Dee, Peter Dee, Oscar Blaza and Roberto Uyquienco, as private respondents.

Finding that respondent Secretary of Justice committed grave abuse of discretion in ordering the withdrawal of the information, the appellate court, on January 27, 1993, rendered judgment through its Fifth Division,[12] the decretal portion of which reads:

WHEREFORE, the petition for certiorari is GRANTED. The Resolutions dated December 11, 1991 and September 2, 1992 of the Department of Justice are hereby Annulled and SET ASIDE. No costs.

SO ORDERED.[13]

On February 10, 1993, a manifestation with motion was filed by the Chuas with the conformity of the City Prosecutor informing the trial court of the above-quoted decision. The City Prosecutor likewise prayed for immediate arraignment of the accused and hearing of the case.[14]

On February 17, 1993, the trial court granted the motion and ordered the reinstatement of the information.[15]

On February 18, 1993, a Motion for Reconsideration of the Court of Appeals decision was filed by the Dees, et. al., as private respondents.[16] The same was however denied in a resolution of the appellate court dated July 13, 1993.[17] Public respondents did not move for reconsideration.

Hence, the instant petition for review by the Dees, et. al. which merely reiterates the grounds and arguments raised before the respondent court.

The petition lacks merit.

The Court of Appeals correctly granted the Chuas' (herein private respondents) petition for certiorari.

In the instant petition for review, petitioners vigorously contend that the remedy available to the Chuas from the resolutions of the Department of Justice dated December 11, 1991 and September 2, 1992, respectively, was an ordinary appeal to the Court of Appeals, not a special civil action for certiorari as was resorted to by them. They maintain that the remedy of appeal was however forfeited because of the Chuas' failure to file the appeal in due time. They cite the following provisions to support their claim, viz: (a) Section 9(3) of the Judiciary

Reorganization Act; (b) Rule 19(a) of the Interim Rules and Guidelines; (c) Sections 15 and 25(5), Book VII of the Administrative Code; and (d) paragraph 4 of Circular 1-91 of the Supreme Court.

On their part, private respondents assert that a petition for certiorari under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court was the proper relief arguing that resolutions or decisions rendered by the Justice Secretary are appealable only to the President. However, only cases where the imposable penalty is reclusion perpetua to death are reviewable by the Office of the President. Consequently, there was no appeal nor any plain, speedy and adequate remedy then available to them save only a special civil action for certiorari under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court.

We agree with the private respondents. The President exercises power of control over all executive departments, bureaus and offices,[18] hence, decisions and/or resolutions rendered by heads of the executive departments are appealable only to the President. In the case at bench, appeal of the assailed resolutions of the Department of Justice to the Office of the President cannot be had because of Memorandum Circular No. 1266, in relation to Memorandum No. 1294 dated November 4, 1993. Said memorandum circular provides:

In the interest of the speedy administration of justice and in order to avoid undue and unnecessary involvement of the Presidency in adversary suits before the courts, the following guidelines are hereby prescribed in appeals/reviews of resolutions in preliminary investigations of criminal cases.

When complainants and/or respondents petition for an appeal/review by the President of investigations conducted by Provincial/City Fiscals and resolved on appeal by the Ministry of Justice, the petition shall not be given due course and shall be forthwith denied, except that in offenses punishable by reclusion perpetua to death wherein new and material issues are raised which were not previously presented before the Ministry of Justice and were not ruled upon in the subject resolution by the Minister of Justice, the President may order the Minister of Justice to reopen/review the case provided that the prescription of the offense is not due to lapse within six (6) months from notice of the questioned resolution, and provided further that the petition for appeal/review is filed within thirty (30) days from such notice.

Evidently, there was no appeal, or any plain, speedy, and adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law available to herein private respondents, hence, the filing of the petition for certiorari before the respondent court was proper.

Also, petitioners would like us to annul and set aside the findings of the Court of Appeals. This we cannot do. It must be stressed that only questions of law may be raised in a petition filed in this Court to review the decision of the Court of Appeals.[19] This being so, the findings of respondent court are rendered final and conclusive and the same cannot be reviewed by this Court save only in the following cases which we find absent in the instant case, to wit:

(1) When the conclusion is a finding grounded entirely on speculation, surmises or conjectures (Joaquin v. Navarro, 93 Phil. 257[1953]; (2) When the inference made is manifestly mistaken, absurd or impossible (Luna v. Linatok, 74 Phil. 15[1942]; (3) Where there is a grave abuse of discretion (Buyco v. People, 95 Phil. 453[1955]; (4) When the judgment is based on a misapprehension of facts (Cruz v. Sosing, L--4875, Nov. 27, 1953); (5) When the findings of facts are conflicting (Casica v. Villaseca, L-9590 Ap. 30, 1957; unrep.); (6) When the Court of Appeals, in making its findings, went beyond the issues of the case and the same is contrary to the admissions of both appellant and appellee (Evangelista v. Alto Surety and Insurance Co., 103 Phil. 401[1958]; (7) The findings of the Court of Appeals are contrary to those of the trial court (Garcia v. Court of Appeals, 33 SCRA 622[1970]) Sacay v. Sandiganbayan, 142 SCRA 593[1986]); (8) When the findings of fact are conclusions without citation of specific evidence on which they are based (Ibid.); (9) When the facts set forth in the petition as well as in the petitioners' main and reply briefs are not disputed by the respondents (Ibid.); and (10) The findings of fact of the Court of Appeals is premised on the supposed absence of evidence and is contradicted by

the evidence on record (*Salazar v. Gutierrez*, 33 SCRA 242 [1970]).[20]

Moreover, the incidents that transpired after the promulgation of the decision of the Court of Appeals render the present recourse futile and the issues raised herein stale. First, on February 17, 1993, the trial court ordered the reinstatement of the information against herein petitioners after a manifestation with motion was filed by herein private respondents with the conformity of the City Prosecutor praying that the information be reinstated and the arraignment set. Second, the Department of Justice showed no interest in the case after the Court of Appeals rendered the questioned judgment. In fact, records will bear out that it did not file a motion to reconsider the assailed decision; neither did it raise an objection to the manifestation/ motion for reinstatement prayed for by the City Prosecutor nor did it vigorously support petitioners' case as it is not named a party-petitioner in the instant petition. Consequently, its silence must be considered as conformity and acquiescence to the assailed decision.

In this connection, we wish to reiterate our admonition in *Crespo v. Mogul*[21] that the Secretary of Justice should, as far as practicable, refrain from entertaining a petition for review or appeal from the action of the fiscal once a complaint or information has already been filed in court. The matter should be left entirely for the determination of the court. We held in that case that:

The rule therefore in this jurisdiction is that once a complaint or information is filed in Court any disposition of the case as its dismissal or the conviction or acquittal of the accused rests in the sound discretion of the Court. Although the fiscal retains the direction and control of the prosecution of criminal cases even while the case is already in Court he cannot impose his opinion on the trial court. The Court is the best and sole judge on what to do with the case before it. The determination of the case is within its exclusive jurisdiction and competence. A motion to dismiss the case filed by the fiscal should be addressed to the Court who has the option to grant or deny the same. It does not matter if this is done before or after the arraignment of the accused or that the motion was filed after a reinvestigation or upon instructions of the Secretary of Justice who reviewed the records of the investigation.

In order therefor to avoid such a situation whereby the opinion of the Secretary of Justice who reviewed the action of the fiscal may be disregarded by the trial court, the Secretary of Justice should, as far as practicable, refrain from entertaining a petition for review or appeal from the action of the fiscal, when the complaint or information has already been filed in Court. The matter should be left entirely for the determination of the Court. (*Italics ours*).

More to the point is our ruling in *Manuel P. Martinez v. Court of Appeals, et. al.*,[22] which involves antecedents similar to those in the instant case. There, we set aside the order of the trial court dismissing a criminal case for libel solely upon motion of the fiscal after the latter was directed to move for dismissal by then Acting Justice Secretary Silvestre Bello III. Here, the trial court ordered the information withdrawn on the basis alone of the motion and manifestation of Assistant City Prosecutor Manuel A. Ortega that he was directed to move for such withdrawal of the same by then Acting Justice Secretary Silvestre Bello III. In both cases, no independent evaluation or determination of the evidence or merits of the case was conducted by the trial judges before the cases were ordered dismissed, resultantly tainting the dismissal with grave abuse of discretion. We reproduce our ruling in *Manuel P. Martinez* below for clarity and emphasis, viz:

(T)he dismissal was based merely on the findings of the Acting Secretary of Justice that no libel was committed. The trial judge did not make an independent evaluation or assessment of the merits of the case. Reliance was placed solely on the conclusion of the prosecution that 'there is no sufficient evidence against the said accused to sustain the allegation in the information' and on the supposed lack of objection to the motion to dismiss, this last premise being, however, questionable, the prosecution having failed, as observed, to give private complainant a copy of the motion to dismiss.

In other words, the grant of the motion to dismiss was based upon considerations other than the judge's own

personal individual conviction that there was no case against the accused. Whether to approve or disapprove the stand taken by the prosecution is not the exercise of discretion required in cases like this. The trial judge must himself be convinced that there was indeed no sufficient evidence against the accused, and this conclusion can be arrived at only after an assessment of the evidence in the possession of the prosecution. What was imperatively required was the trial judge's own assessment of such evidence, it not being sufficient for the valid and proper exercise of judicial discretion merely to accept the prosecution's word for its supposed insufficiency.

As aptly observed by the Office of the Solicitor General, in failing to make an independent finding of the merits of the case and merely anchoring the dismissal on the revised position of the prosecution, the trial judge relinquished the discretion he was duty bound to exercise. In effect, it was the prosecution, through the Department of Justice which decided what to do and not the court which was reduced to a mere rubber stamp in violation of the ruling in *Crespo v. Mogul*.

The dismissal order having been issued in violation of private complainant's right to due process as well as upon an erroneous exercise of judicial discretion, the Court of Appeals did not err in setting aside said dismissal order and remanding the case to the trial court for arraignment of petitioner as accused therein and for further proceedings. (Underscoring ours)

In the case at bench, the vacillation of the officials of the Department of Justice with respect to the disposition of the petition for review of the city prosecutor's action is apparent. As borne out by the records, when the prosecutor's finding of probable cause was first brought before the Department of Justice for review, the petition was denied, the Assistant Chief State Prosecutor reasoning that "(u)nder Department Circular No. 7 dated January 25, 1990, only resolutions of prosecutors dismissing a criminal complaint are cognizable for review by this Office. While there may be exceptions to the rule, there is no showing that the case subject of your appeal falls within the excepted cases where there appears that manifest error or grave abuse discretion has been committed." On motion for reconsideration, however, the same petition for review was granted by then Acting Secretary of Justice Silvestre Bello, III who directed the city prosecutor of Pasay to move for the dismissal of the information in Criminal Case No. 91-1633. Such ambivalence does not serve the best interest of justice especially so when there exists *prima facie* case against the petitioners in the case at bar.

WHEREFORE, finding no reversible error committed by the respondent Court, the assailed decision dated January 27, 1993 and resolution dated July 13, 1993 are hereby **AFFIRMED** and the instant petition is **DISMISSED** for lack of merit.

SO ORDERED.

Padilla, (Chairman), Davide, Jr., Bellosillo, and Quason, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 73-89; Original Records, pp. 3-19.

[2] *Id.*, at pp. 84-88; *Id.*, at pp. 14-18.

[3] *Id.*, at p. 88; *Id.*, at p. 18.

[4] *Id.*, at pp. 4, 362-363.

[5] *Id.*, at pp. 399-400; Original Records, p. 1.

[6] *Id.*, at p. 400.

[7] *Id.*, at p. 71.

[8] Id., at p. 228-a.

[9] Court of Appeals Rollo, p. 262; Original Records, p. 207.

[10] Original Records, pp. 208-222.

[11] Rollo, p. 405; Id., at p. 325.

[12] Per Justice Consuelo Ynares-Santiago, ponente and Justice Minerva Gonzaga-Reyes and the late Justice Luis Javellana, concurring.

[13] Court of Appeals Rollo, p. 221; Rollo, p. 232.

[14] Rollo, p. 405; Original Records, p. 325.

[15] Ibid.; Ibid.

[16] Court of Appeals Rollo, pp. 223-250.

[17] Id., at pp. 309-311.

[18] Section 1, Chapter I, Book III of the Revised Administrative Code of 1987.

[19] Section 2, Rule 45 of the Rules of Court.

[20] See Reyes v. Court of Appeals, 216 SCRA 25, 31 [1992]; Saludo v. Court of Appeals, 207 SCRA 498, 506 [1992]; and Manlapaz v. Court of Appeals, 147 SCRA 236 [1982].

[21] 151 SCRA 462.

[22] G.R. No. 112387, October 13, 1994.

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