

SECRETARY TEOFISTO GUINGONA, JR.; STATE PROSECUTORS JUDE ROMANO, LEAH ARMAMENTO, MANUEL TORREVILLAS, JOAQUIN ESCOVAR, MENRADO CORPUS; THE NATIONAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION; AND P...

G.R. No. 125532. July 10, 1998

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

This case is an offshoot of the investigation conducted by the government in the last quarter of 1995, which delved into the alleged participation of national and local officials in jueteng and other forms of illegal gambling. Although the Court of Appeals upheld the admission into the Witness Protection Program of Potenciano A. Roque, who claimed personal knowledge of such gambling activities, the secretary of justice nonetheless challenges the side opinion of the appellate court that the testimony of the witness must, as a condition precedent to his admission into said Program, be shown to be capable of substantial corroboration in its material points. The justice secretary claims that such corroboration need not be demonstrated prior to or simultaneous with the witness' admission into the Program, as long as such requirement can be demonstrated when he actually testifies in court. However, inasmuch as Roque has already been admitted into the Program and has actually finished testifying, the issue presented by petitioners has become moot. Thus, any judgment that this Court may render on the instant petition would be merely an academic disquisition on a hypothetical problem. Until it can be shown that an actual controversy exists, courts have no jurisdiction to render a binding decision.

The Case

This is a petition for review on certiorari to partially set aside the June 28, 1996 Decision of the Court of Appeals,[1] which disposed as follows:[2]

“WHEREFORE, premises considered, the petition is hereby DISMISSED for want of merit, and the injunction issued against respondent judges from hearing the criminal actions against petitioner is hereby LIFTED.

SO ORDERED.”

The Court of Appeals upheld the justice secretary's denial on January 11, 1996 of private respondent's “Petition for Reconsideration of Admittance of Potenciano A. Roque to the Witness Protection Program.”

Although Respondent Court ruled in favor of the government, herein petitioners nonetheless assail the following portion of the said Decision:

“x x x From the explicit terms of the statute, it is at once apparent that the presence of such corroborative evidence is sine qua non to a witness' admission into the Program. Being in the nature of a condition precedent [to] his admission into the Program, the existence of such corroborative evidence must be shown at the time his application for admission is being evaluated.”

The Antecedent Facts

Petitioners relate the antecedent facts of this case as follows:[3]

“Sometime in the last quarter of 1995, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) conducted an investigation on the alleged participation and involvement of national and local government officials in “jueteng” and other forms of illegal gambling.

The case was also the subject of a legislative inquiry/investigation by both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

In November 1995, one Potenciano Roque, claiming to be an eyewitness to the networking of xxx national and local politicians and gambling lords, sought admission into the Government’s “Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program.” Allegedly, he gained first-hand information in his capacity as Chairman of the Task Force Anti-Gambling (TFAG) during the term of former President Corazon C. Aquino until his resignation in 1989. He also revealed that he and members of his family were in danger of being liquidated, facing as he did the formidable world of corruption with a well-entrenched hold on Philippine social, political and economic systems.

After a thorough evaluation of his qualifications, convinced of his compliance with the requirements of Republic Act No. 6981, otherwise known as the “Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Act,” the Department of Justice admitted Roque to the program, providing him a monthly allowance, temporary shelter and personal and security protection during witness duty.

On November 30, 1995, Roque executed a sworn statement before NBI Agents Sixto M. Burgos, Jr. and Nelson M. Bartolome, alleging that during his stint as Chairman of the Task Force Anti-Gambling (TFAG), several gambling lords, including private respondent Rodolfo Pineda, and certain politicians offered him money and other valuable considerations, which he accepted, upon his agreement to cease conducting raids on their respective gambling operations (Annex “B”).

On the basis of Roque’s sworn statement, the sworn statement and supplemental affidavit of one Angelito H. Sanchez, and the sworn statement of Gen. Lorenzo Mateo (Annexes ‘C,’ ‘D’ and ‘E’), then NBI Director Mariano M. Mison forwarded the result of their investigation on the ‘jueteng’ scam to the Department of Justice (DOJ), recommending the filing of the following charges against Pineda and other persons x x x.

x x x x x x x x

The DOJ Task Force on Illegal Gambling (composed of the petitioner-prosecutors), created by petitioner Secretary Teofisto Guingona on November 24, 1995 (Annex ‘F’), conducted a preliminary investigation of the case and subpoenaed all the respondents in I.S. No. 95-774, therein requiring them to submit their counter-affidavits by December 22, 1995.

On December 21, 1995, Roque executed a supplemental sworn statement relative to I.S. No. 95-774, clarifying some of his statements in his first affidavit (Annex ‘G’). Consequently, the December 22, 1995 setting was cancelled and reset to January 8, 1996 to give Pineda and other respondents time to refute the charges contained in the supplemental sworn statement.

On January 5, 1996, Pineda filed a ‘Petition for Reconsideration of Admittance of Potenciano A. Roque to the Witness Protection Program,’ which was denied by petitioner Secretary in a letter-reply dated January 11, 1996 (Annexes ‘H’ and ‘I’). On January 23, 1996, Pineda filed a Petition for Certiorari, Prohibition and Mandamus with Application for Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction with the respondent Court of Appeals.

x x x x x x x x

In the meantime, petitioner-prosecutors proceeded with their preliminary investigation, and on February 2, 1996, they issued a resolution finding probable cause to charge private respondent Pineda with several offenses (Annex 'K'). On February 5, 1996, three (3) Informations for corruption of public officials were filed against him in the Manila and Pasig City Trial Courts (Annexes 'L,' 'M' and 'N'). He was subsequently arraigned on February 28, 1996 in the Regional Trial Court, Branch 7 of the City of Manila presided by Judge Enrico Lanzanes, and on March 14, 1996 in the Regional Trial Court, Branch 168, of Pasig City, presided by Judge Benjamin Pelayo.

On March 19, 1996, the Court of Appeals came up with a writ of preliminary injunction enjoining both trial courts from hearing the criminal actions in the meantime."

The Ruling of the Court of Appeals

In its Decision, Respondent Court addressed mainly the issue of whether the secretary of justice acted in excess of his jurisdiction (a) in admitting Petitioner Roque into the Program and (b) in excluding him from the Informations filed against private respondent. Private respondent contended that Roque's admission was illegal on two grounds: first, his testimony could not be substantially corroborated in its material points; and second, he appeared to be the most guilty or at least more guilty than private respondent, insofar as the crimes charged in the Informations were concerned.

Respondent Court also ruled that RA 6981 contemplates two kinds of witnesses: (a) a witness who has perceived or has knowledge of, or information on, the commission of a crime under Section 3; and (b) a particeps criminis or a participant in the crime under Section 10.

Based on his sworn statements, Roque participated in the commission of the crimes imputed to private respondent (corruption of public officials) by accepting bribe money. Necessarily, his admission to the Program fell under Section 10, which requires that he should not appear to be the most guilty of the imputed crimes. Respondent Court found that private respondent sought to bribe him several times to prevent him from conducting raids on private respondent's gambling operations. Such "passive participation" in the crimes did not make him more guilty than private respondent.

On the first issue, Respondent Court initially ruled that, by express provision of Sections 3 and 10, the requirement of corroboration is a condition precedent to admission into the Program. A contrary interpretation would only sanction the squandering of the various benefits of the Program on one who might later be adjudged disqualified from admission for lack of evidence to corroborate his testimony.

However, in the same breath, Respondent Court upheld herein petitioners' alternative position that substantial corroboration was nevertheless actually provided by Angelito Sanchez' and retired Gen. Lorenzo M. Mateo's testimonies. Hence, it disposed in favor of the government.

Subsequently, this petition was filed.[4]

The Issue

The lone issue raised by this petition is worded as follows:

"Whether or not a witness' testimony requires prior or simultaneous corroboration at the time he is admitted into the witness protection, security and benefit program."[5]

As noted earlier, this petition is unusual and unique. Despite ruling in their favor, Respondent Court is assailed by petitioners for opining that admission to the Program requires prior or simultaneous corroboration of the material points in the witness' testimony.

Respondent Court and private respondent are of the opinion that Sections 3 (b) & 10 (d) of RA 6981 expressly require that corroboration must already exist at the time of the witness' application as a prerequisite to admission into the Program. RA 6981 pertinently provides:

“Sec. 10. State Witness. Any person who has participated in the commission of a crime and desires to be a witness for the State, can apply and, if qualified as determined in this Act and by the Department, shall be admitted into the Program whenever the following are present:

x x x x x x x x

(d) his testimony can be substantially corroborated on its material points;

x x x x x x x x.”

On the other hand, petitioners contend that said provisions merely require that the testimony of the state witness seeking admission into the Program “can be substantially corroborated” or is “capable of corroboration.” So long as corroboration can be obtained when he testifies in court, he satisfies the requirement that “his testimony can be substantially corroborated on its material points.”

The Court's Ruling

The petition must fail, because the facts and the issue raised by petitioners do not warrant the exercise of judicial power.

No Actual Controversy

Without going into the merits of the case, the Court finds the petition fundamentally defective. The Constitution provides that judicial power “includes the duty of the courts of justice to settle actual controversies involving rights which are legally demandable and enforceable.”[6] According to Fr. Joaquin Bernas, a noted constitutionalist, courts are mandated to settle disputes between real conflicting parties through the application of the law.[7] Judicial review, which is merely an aspect of judicial power, demands the following: (1) there must be an actual case calling for the exercise of judicial power; (2) the question must be ripe for adjudication;[8] and (3) the person challenging must have “standing”; that is, he has personal and substantial interest in the case, such that he has sustained or will sustain direct injury.[9]

The first requisite is that there must be before a court an actual case calling for the exercise of judicial power. Courts have no authority to pass upon issues through advisory opinions or to resolve hypothetical or feigned problems[10] or friendly suits collusively arranged between parties without real adverse interests.[11] Courts do not sit to adjudicate mere academic questions to satisfy scholarly interest, however intellectually challenging.[12] As a condition precedent to the exercise of judicial power, an actual controversy between litigants must first exist.[13]

An actual case or controversy exists when there is a conflict of legal rights or an assertion of opposite legal claims, which can be resolved on the basis of existing law and jurisprudence. A justiciable controversy is distinguished from a hypothetical or abstract difference or dispute, in that the former involves a definite and concrete dispute touching on the legal relations of parties having adverse legal interests. A justiciable controversy admits of specific relief through a decree that is conclusive in character, whereas an opinion only advises what the law would be upon a hypothetical state of facts.[14]

Thus, no actual controversy was found in *Abbas vs. Commission on Elections*[15] regarding the provision in the Organic Act, which mandates that should there be any conflict between national law and Islamic Law, the Shari'ah courts should apply the former. In that case, the petitioner maintained that since the Islamic Law

(Shari'ah) was derived from the Koran, which makes it part of divine law, the Shari'ah may not be subjected to any "man-made" national law. This Court dismissed petitioner's argument because, as enshrined in the Constitution, judicial power includes the duty to settle actual controversies involving rights which are legally demandable and enforceable. No actual controversy between real litigants existed, because no conflicting claims involving the application of national law were presented. This being so, the Supreme Court refused to rule on a merely perceived potential conflict between the provisions of the Muslim Code and those of the national law.

In contrast, the Court held in *Sabello vs. Department of Education, Culture and Sports*[16] that there was a justiciable controversy where the issue involved was whether petitioner -- after he was given an absolute pardon -- merited reappointment to the position he had held prior to his conviction, that of Elementary Principal I. The Court said that such dispute was not hypothetical or abstract, for there was a definite and concrete controversy touching on the legal relations of parties and admitting of specific relief through a court decree that was conclusive in character. That case did not call for mere opinion or advice, but for affirmative relief.

Closely related to the requirement of an "actual case," Bernas continues, is the second requirement that the question is "ripe" for adjudication. A question is ripe for adjudication when the act being challenged has had a direct adverse effect on the individual challenging it. Thus, in *PACU vs. Secretary of Education*,[17] the Court declined to pass judgment on the question of the validity of Section 3 of Act No. 2706, which provided that before a private school may be opened to the public, it must first obtain a permit from the secretary of education, because all the petitioning schools had permits to operate and were actually operating, and none of them claimed that the secretary had threatened to revoke their permit.

In *Tan vs. Macapagal*,[18] the Court said that Petitioner Gonzales "had the good sense to wait" until after the enactment of the statute [Rep. Act No. 4913 (1967)] requiring the submission to the electorate of certain proposed amendments to the Constitution [Resolution Nos. 1 and 3 of Congress as a constituent body (1967)] before he could file his suit. It was only when this condition was met that the matter became ripe for adjudication; prior to that stage, the judiciary had to keep its hands off.

The doctrine of separation of powers calls for each branch of government to be left alone to discharge its duties as it sees fit. Being one such branch, the judiciary, Justice Laurel asserted, "will neither direct nor restrain executive [or legislative action] x x x." [19] The legislative and the executive branches are not allowed to seek its advice on what to do or not to do; thus, judicial inquiry has to be postponed in the meantime. Before a court may enter the picture, a prerequisite is that something has been accomplished or performed by either branch. Then may it pass on the validity of what has been done but, then again, only "when x x x properly challenged in an appropriate legal proceeding." [20]

In the case at bar, it is at once apparent that petitioners are not requesting that this Court reverse the ruling of the appellate court and disallow the admission in evidence of Respondent Roque's testimony, inasmuch as the assailed Decision does not appear to be in conflict with any of their present claims. Petitioners filed this suit out of fear that the assailed Decision would frustrate the purpose of said law, which is to encourage witnesses to come out and testify. But their apprehension is neither justified nor exemplified by this particular case. A mere apprehension does not give rise to a justiciable controversy.

After finding no grave abuse of discretion on the part of the government prosecutors, Respondent Court allowed the admission of Roque into the Program. In fact, Roque had already testified in court against the private respondent. Thus, the propriety of Roque's admission into the Program is already a moot and academic issue that clearly does not warrant judicial review.

Manifestly, this petition involves neither any right that was violated nor any claims that conflict. In fact, no

affirmative relief is being sought in this case. The Court concurs with the opinion of counsel for private respondent that this action is a “purely academic exercise,” which has no relevance to the criminal cases against Respondent Pineda. After the assailed Decision had been rendered, trial in those cases proceeded in earnest, and Roque testified in all of them. Said counsel filed his Memorandum only to satisfy his “academic interest on how the State machinery will deal with witnesses who are admittedly guilty of the crimes but are discharged to testify against their co-accused.”[21]

Petitioners failed not only to present an actual controversy, but also to show a case ripe for adjudication. Hence, any resolution that this Court might make in this case would constitute an attempt at abstraction that can only lead to barren legal dialectics and sterile conclusions unrelated to actualities.[22]

An Executive Function

In the present petition, the government is in effect asking this Court to render an advisory opinion on what the government prosecutors should do – when, how and whom to grant or to deny admission into the Program. To accede to it is tantamount to an incursion into the functions of the executive department. From their arguments stated above, both sides have obviously missed this crucial point, which is succinctly stated in *Webb vs. De Leon*: [23]

“It is urged that they [the provisions of RA 6918] constitute ‘xxx an intrusion into judicial prerogative for it is only the court which has the power under the Rules on Criminal Procedure to discharge an accused as a state witness.’ The argument is based on Section 9, Rule 119 which gives the court the prerogative to approve the discharge of an accused to be a state witness. Petitioner’s argument lacks appeal for it lies on the faulty assumption that the decision whom to prosecute is a judicial function, the sole prerogative of courts and beyond executive and legislative interference. In truth, the prosecution of crimes appertains to the executive department of government whose principal power and responsibility is to see that our laws are faithfully executed. A necessary component of this power to execute our laws is the right to prosecute their violators. The right to prosecute vests the prosecutor with a wide range of discretion—the discretion of whether, what and whom to charge, the exercise of which depends on a smorgasbord of factors which are best appreciated by prosecutors. We thus hold that it is not constitutionally impermissible for Congress to enact R.A. 6981 vesting in the Department of Justice the power to determine who can qualify as a witness in the program and who shall be granted immunity from prosecution. Section 9 of Rule 119 does not support the proposition that the power to choose who shall be a state witness is an inherent judicial prerogative. Under this provision, the court is given the power to discharge a state witness only because it has already acquired jurisdiction over the crime and the accused. The discharge of an accused is part of the exercise of jurisdiction but is not a recognition of an inherent judicial function. Moreover, the Rules of Court have never been interpreted to be beyond change by legislation designed to improve the administration of our justice system.” [Emphasis ours]

Simply stated, the decision on whether to prosecute and whom to indict is executive in character. Only when an information, charging two or more persons with a certain offense, has already been filed in court will Rule 119, Section 9 of the Rules of Court, come into play, viz.:

“SEC. 9. Discharge of one of several defendants to be witness for the prosecution.—When two or more persons are charged with the commission of a certain offense, the competent court, at any time before they have entered upon their defense, may direct one or more of them to be discharged with the latter’s consent that he or they may be witnesses for the government when in the judgment of the court:

- (a) There is absolute necessity for the testimony of the defendant whose discharge is requested;
- (b) There is no other direct evidence available for the proper prosecution of the offense committed, except the testimony of said defendant;

- (c) The testimony of said defendant can be substantially corroborated in its material points;
- (d) Said defendant does not appear to be the most guilty;
- (e) Said defendant has not at any time been convicted of any offense involving moral turpitude.”

In the present case, Roque was not one of those accused in the Informations filed by the government prosecutors. Rule 119, Section 9, is therefore clearly not applicable.

A resort to the progenitors of RA 6981 will yield the same result. Although Presidential Decree 1731 and National Emergency Memorandum Order No. 26 state only when immunity from suit attaches to a witness, they do not specify who are qualified for admission into the Program. PD 1731, otherwise known as a law “Providing for Rewards and Incentives to Government Witnesses and Informants and for Other Purposes” provides:

“SEC. 4. Any such informants or witnesses who shall testify, or provide vital information, regarding the existence or activity of a group involved in the commission of crimes against national security or public order, or of an organized/syndicated crime or crime group, and/or the culpability of individual members thereof in accordance with this Decree shall, upon recommendation of the state prosecutor, fiscal or military lawyer, as approved by the Secretary of National Defense or the Secretary of Justice, as the case may be, be immune from criminal prosecution for his participation or involvement in any such criminal activity which is the subject of the investigation or prosecution, in addition to the benefits under Sec. 2 hereof: Provided, that, immunity from criminal prosecution shall, in the case of a witness offering to testify, attach only upon his actually testifying in court in accordance with his undertaking as accepted by the state prosecutor, fiscal, or military lawyer: Provided, further, that the following conditions are complied with:

x x x x x x x x

c. That such testimony or information can be substantially corroborated in its material points;

x x x x x x x x.”

The same tenor was adopted in National Emergency Memorandum Order No. 26 signed by former President Corazon C. Aquino, Section 5(c) of which provides:

“c. Immunity from Criminal Prosecution.—This applies to the witness participation or involvement in the criminal case in which his testimony is necessary and may be availed of only upon his actually testifying in court in accordance with his undertaking, and provided that:

x x x x x x x x

(3) Such testimony or information can be substantially corroborated in its material points;

x x x x x x x x.”

One may validly infer from the foregoing that the government prosecutor is afforded much leeway in choosing whom to admit into the Program. Such inference is in harmony with the basic principle that this is an executive function.

RA 6981 is a much needed penal reform law that could help the government in curbing crime by providing an antidote, as it were, to the usual reluctance of witnesses to testify. The Department of Justice has clearly explained the rationale for said law:[24]

‘Witnesses, for fear of reprisal and economic dislocation, usually refuse to appear and testify in the investigation/prosecution of criminal complaints/cases. Because of such refusal, criminal complaints/cases have been dismissed for insufficiency and/or lack of evidence. For a more effective administration of criminal

justice, there was a necessity to pass a law protecting witnesses and granting them certain rights and benefits to ensure their appearance in investigative bodies/courts.’

This Court should then leave to the executive branch the decision on how best to administer the Witness Protection Program. Unless an actual controversy arises, we should not jump the gun and unnecessarily intervene in this executive function.

Closer Scrutiny of the Assailed Decision

Finally, an accurate reading of the assailed Decision will further enlighten petitioners as to its true message. Respondent Court did sustain Roque’s admission into the Program -- even as it held that the first contention of petitioners was untenable -- based on the latter’s alternative argument that Roque’s testimony was sufficiently corroborated by that of General Mateo. While Respondent Court insisted that corroboration must exist prior to or simultaneous with Roque’s admission into the Program, it sanctioned subsequent compliance to cure this defect. The reason for this is found in the penultimate paragraph of the Decision, in which Respondent Court categorically stated that it found no manifest abuse of discretion in the petitioners’ action. There is no quarrel with this point. Until a more opportune occasion involving a concrete violation of RA 6981 arises, the Court has no jurisdiction to rule on the issue raised by petitioners.

WHEREFORE, the petition is hereby DENIED.
SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., (Chairman), Bellosillo, Vitug, and Quisumbing, JJ., concur.

[1] Fifteenth Division, composed of JJ. Salome A. Montoya, chairperson; Godardo A. Jacinto, ponente; and Maximiano C. Asuncion, member.

[2] Rollo, p. 43.

[3] Petition, pp. 3-10; Rollo, pp. 14-21.

[4] This case was deemed submitted for decision after the receipt of private respondents’ Memorandum on October 28, 1997.

[5] Petition, p. 10; Rollo, p. 21.

[6] Article VIII, Section 1.

[7] Bernas, *The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*, Vol. II, 1988 ed., pp. 275-276.

[8] *Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities vs. Secretary of Education*, 97 Phil. 806, 810 (1955); and *Tan vs. Macapagal*, 43 SCRA 678, 680-682, February 29, 1972.

[9] *People vs. Vera*, 65 Phil. 58, 89 (1937).

[10] Bernas, *The Constitution*, citing *Muskrat vs. United States*, 219 U.S. 346, 362 (1911).

[11] *Ibid.*, citing *Ashwander vs. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 297 U.S. 288, 346 (1936).

[12] *PACU vs. Secretary of Education*, *supra* on footnote no. 6.

[13] *Angara v. Electoral Commission*, 63 Phil. 139, 158, July 15, 1936; *Tan v. Macapagal*, *supra* on footnote no. 7.

- [14] Isagani A. Cruz, Philippine Political Law, 1995 ed., pp. 241-242.
- [15] 179 SCRA 287, 299-300, November 10, 1989, per Cortés, J.
- [16] 180 SCRA 623, 626, December 26, 1989, per Gancayco, J.
- [17] 97 Phil. 806, 810 (1955).
- [18] Supra on footnote no. 7, per Fernando, J.
- [19] Planas vs. Gil, 67 Phil. 62, 73 (1939).
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Respondent's Memorandum, filed by Atty. Roberto A. Abad, pp. 2-3; Rollo, pp. 149-150.
- [22] Angara vs. Electoral Commission, supra on footnote no. 11, per Laurel, J.
- [23] 247 SCRA 652, August 23, 1995, per Puno, J., pp. 685-686.
- [24] Primer on the Witness Protection Security and Benefit Act (R.A. No. 6981), p. 1.

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