

**PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. ARNULFO
“MIKE” NATIVIDAD, JUN CABAONG, SESINANDO
“BOY” LLERINA (AT LARGE) AND VICENTE MILLADO,
ACCUSED.**

G.R. No. 138017. February 23, 2001

Ponente: KAPUNAN, J.

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KAPUNAN, J.:

Inside the police station of Ramos, Tarlac, appellant Arnulfo "Mike" Natividad who was the municipal mayor, shot one Severino L. Aquino in the head at point blank range in front of the police officers on duty. Four years later, four police officers were asked to, and did, testify against the appellant and the other accused. The pivotal issue in this appeal is whether or not the delay of four (4) years by the police officers in revealing information regarding the crime impairs their credibility.

Appellant and the other accused were charged with the murder of one Severino L. Aquino in an Amended Information[1] dated August 25, 1993. Upon arraignment on January 4, 1994, Arnulfo Natividad pleaded "not guilty." Vicente Millado, likewise, pleaded "not guilty" when arraigned on April 11, 1994. The Sesinando Llerina remains at large. There is no record whether Jun Cabaong was apprehended or indicted.

Upon trial, the prosecution presented as witnesses SP02 Felipe Padua, SP03 Reynaldo Daileg, SP02 Daniel Latosquin and P01 Jimmy Rebuyaco, all members of the Philippine National Police at the time of the incident. Likewise, Myrna Aquino was presented to establish the funeral expenses.

SP02 Felipe Padua testified that at around 10:00 in the evening of February 20, 1989, he was on duty together with SP04 Euvigildo Pagaduan, then the Chief of the police station, SP03 Reynaldo Daileg and SP02 Daniel Latosquin. Cabaong then arrived at the Ramos PNP station with the victim, Severino Aquino. Inside the station, Cabaong informed SPO2 Padua that Mayor Natividad wanted to talk to Aquino. The latter was then made to sit on a chair with his two hands over his chest.[2] After five minutes, appellant, who was with around ten companions, arrived at the station and seated himself in front of the victim.[3] SP02 Padua noticed that appellant was drunk. Appellant started questioning the victim, asking what his name was, where he came from, and why he (Aquino) was drunk. When the victim was not able to answer his questions, appellant got angry and pointed a 9 mm pistol at him. SPO2 Padua and SPO3 Daileg approached appellant and tried to calm him down. Appellant, in an angry voice, said, "Why are you tolerating this man? He is a thief and an NPA." [4] According to SPO3 Daileg, the appellant also said, "If you stop me, it's you I will kill." [5] SPO2 Padua and SPO3 Daileg moved back. Appellant then seated himself and again started to interrogate the victim. The victim, however, was still unable to give an intelligible answer and called appellant "Tatang." [6] Infuriated, appellant stood up, pointed the gun at the victim and hit him on the head. [7] Then the appellant ordered accused Cabaong to close the windows of the station, after which the appellant shot the victim on the forehead. [8]

The victim fell face down on the ground. The mayor went out of the station and ordered those present that the

body of the victim be thrown away.[9] After around twenty minutes, an ambulance driven by Boy Llerina arrived. Millado loaded the body into the ambulance. After which, SP03 Pagauan, Latosquin and Daileg cleaned the police station of bloodstains. SP03 Daileg recorded the incident on the police logbook. However, on the same night, the appellant Mayor came back and tore that page in Daileg's presence.[10]

Sometime in February 1989, PO1 Jimmy Rebuyaco, an investigator of the PNP, Ramos, Tarlac, received a report from Leopoldo Aquino that his son was missing. Based on newspaper reports that a cadaver was found in San Miguel, Guimba, Nueva Ecija, PO1 Rebuyaco, together with Leopoldo Aquino and Manuel Aquino, another relative, went to the place and identified the decomposing body to be that of the late Severino L. Aquino. The police officers of Guimba, Nueva Ecija conducted an investigation. Dr. Leopoldo Doctor, medical officer of Guimba, Nueva Ecija, conducted an autopsy of the body and issued a Report on his findings, to wit:

FINDINGS:

- Gunshot wound located at the right parietal region going and out the left cheek (thru and thru).
- Stabbed wound located below the right clavicle directing downward penetrating the right lung.
- Cadavere (sic) is in advance stage of decomposition.[11]

Myrna Aquino, sister of the late Severino L. Aquino, testified that she incurred funeral expenses amounting to P17,000.00.[12]

After the prosecution presented its evidence, appellant filed a demurrer to evidence but the same was denied. On August 1, 1997, appellant filed a motion to dismiss based on the affidavit of desistance executed by all the heirs of Severino L. Aquino.[13] The motion was denied and the case was reset to August 20 and 22, 1997 for the reception of evidence for the defense. Despite the ample opportunity given, the appellant still failed to present any evidence on his own behalf. Subsequently, appellant's counsel manifested that the appellant will not take the witness stand. Thus, without the defense having presented any evidence, the trial court considered the case submitted for decision on November 23, 1998.

In its assailed Decision dated December 18, 1998, the trial court found accused-appellant guilty of murder and sentenced him to suffer the penalty of reclusion perpetua.[14] The trial court declared that the combined testimonies of Reynaldo Daileg, Felipe Padua and Daniel Latosquin, positively and clearly pointed to the accused-appellant Natividad the killing of Severino L. Aquino in cold blood.[15] The decretal portion of the decision reads:

WHEREFORE, Judgment is hereby rendered finding the accused Arnulfo Natividad guilty of murder and is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of reclusion perpetua.

As the Court cannot consider the evidence presented against Natividad binding as against Vicente Millado, who was arraigned after the prosecution had presented the witnesses, the prosecution is ordered to inform this Court within ten (10) days from receipt of this judgment, as to whether it can still present evidence against accused Vicente Millado; otherwise, the Court will dismiss this case against Vicente Millado.

The peace officers are ordered to intensify their efforts to arrest Sesonando "Boy" Llerina. As far as he is concerned, this case will be placed in the archives to be retrieved upon his arrest.

Costs against accused Natividad.

SO ORDERED.[16]

In his brief, appellant contends that:: (1) the prosecution's evidence failed to meet the quantum of proof required

to overcome the presumption of innocence accruing in favor of the appellant; and (2) the police officers are not credible witnesses.[17]

Appellant argues that the four police officers presented by the prosecution are not credible witnesses since it took them four (4) years to come forward and testify against him.[18] He disagrees with the justification of the trial court that the reason for the delay was that the police officers were afraid of the appellant who was then the mayor of Ramos, Tarlac.[19] Appellant further argues that the rule that "a delay in the revelation of a crime does not affect the credibility of the informant as a witness," should only apply to laymen and not to police officers. Considering the avowed duty of police officers to apprehend perpetrators of a crime, the failure of the police-witnesses to arrest the appellant and/or to report the crime to their superiors constituted dereliction of duty; hence, they should not be considered credible witnesses or their testimonies be given weight.[20]

After a close examination of the records of the case, we find that, under the factual circumstances of the case, the delay has been sufficiently explained and there is no cogent reason to disturb the verdict of the trial court finding the appellant guilty of murder.

In *People v. Bautista*, [21] cited by appellant, this Court stated the rule on the effect of delay of a witness in divulging what he or she knows about the commission of the crime, to wit:

The rule is ordinarily to the effect that delay by a witness in divulging what he or she knows about the commission of a crime, such as the identity of the offender, is not by itself a setback to the evidentiary value of such a witness' testimony. The courts, however, have been quick to deny evidentiary weight where such delay is not sufficiently justified by any acceptable explanation.

In its Brief, the Office of the Solicitor General opines that the silence of the witnesses for four (4) years was satisfactorily explained because the records reveal that the witnesses were cowed into silence by appellant who admittedly was an influential man being then the municipal mayor of the place.[22] The appellant municipal mayor exercised moral dominance and influence over these police officers. In addition, he was able to easily intimidate them with his ten (10) bodyguards around him.[23] We find the explanation of the trial court to be enlightening, to wit:

It may be asked - Why did the witnesses come forward only after about four years from the date of the incident? The accused Natividad is the town mayor of Ramos, Tarlac. The way the offense being attributed to him was committed will surely instill fear on the citizens, the policemen who are witnesses in this case included. There is no plausible reason why the Court should not believe them. No ill motivation was shown as to why they will falsely impute to the accused Natividad the commission of a heinous crime if it is not true.[24]

This Court cannot accept the distinction proffered by appellant between laypersons and police officers as witnesses considering the factual circumstances of the case. The accused in this case is no ordinary person in the place where the crime was committed. At that time, the accused-appellant was the municipal mayor. In *People v. Dominguez*, [25] this Court held that the delay of four (4) months did not impair the credibility of the witness since the accused were found to be clearly powerful and influential persons in the place where the crime was committed, namely, the mayor of the place, the mayor's brother, a PC Sergeant and Civil Home Defense Force Supervisor, a Lieutenant of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, a Police Sergeant and Police Station Commander. The fear of the witness heightened with the threat of dire consequences if he would testify. Thus, this Court in *Dominguez* adopted the trial court's rejection of the argument of the defense in this wise:

That defense makes much of Cagod's conduct after the shooting of Boligor. Why did he remain silent when everyone wanted to know who the malefactors were? Why indeed? The defense forgets that the malefactors

were not just any Tom, Dick and Harry - they were, perhaps, the most powerful and influential men in the Municipality of Sinacaban. Alfeo Lucing, who had shadowed Cagod, had already given stern warning. Cagod's fear later took concrete shape when Macalisang threatened him at gunpoint with dire consequences if he as much as breathed a word of the incident. x x x[26]

In *People v. Teehankee*,[27] this Court found the initial reluctance of the witness in revealing to the authorities what he knew because of a real, not imaginary, fear for the witness' and his family's safety a sufficient explanation. The witness had seen with his own eyes the senseless violence perpetrated by the accused who the witness knew belonged to an influential family. Likewise, in *People v. Ferrera*,[28] the witness was overcome by fear arising from the accused's considerable influence in the community that he chose to remain mum about the killing. This did not impair his credibility since a witness' failure to reveal what he knows due to fear of reprisal cannot weaken his credibility.

The dictum expressed by the Court in *People vs. Bautista*,[29] which appellant invokes, is not applicable to the present case due to the difference in factual scenario. A careful study of the *Bautista* case discloses that the delay of the witnesses in revealing what they knew of the crime was not sufficiently explained. In *Bautista*, the eyewitnesses had the opportunity to reveal what they supposedly knew to the town mayor who took a hand in the investigation of the case. In fact, the trial court found that the eyewitnesses had the opportunity to pinpoint appellant therein as the malefactor without necessarily placing their lives, or those of their families, in danger. It was under these circumstances that this Court made the pronouncement cited by appellant, to wit:

xxx Thus, failure to reveal what one witnessed about a crime for a number of days, or weeks, or even a number of months, is allowable. But, that will not hold true where, as in the case now being reviewed, the delay had unreasonably stretched all too far out into a year and four months, especially in the absence of any compelling or rational basis for such self-imposed and lengthy silence. xxx

The length of the delay is not as significant as the reason or explanation of the delay, which must be sufficient or well-grounded. A well-grounded fear of reprisal is a sufficient justification of the delay of the witness in revealing what he/she had witnessed. In *People v. Francisco*,[30] the wife of the witness, who is the victim's sister, prevented him from testifying for fear of reprisal coupled with an actual threat from the accused-appellants was considered a sufficient explanation. In *People v. Pacapac*,[31] the fear of a witness who was related to the victim as they had just undergone a traumatic experience and who believed "that one death in the family is enough" was also considered as an adequate explanation. In *People v. Reoveros*,[32] this Court made the following observation: "It is common experience that people overcome by great fear, not only for their lives but also of their loved ones, will choose to remain tight-lipped about an incident and suffer in silence, rather than expose to risk their own safety and of those for whom they care." [33]

In *People v. Landicho*,[34] while no explanation was given by the witness, the delay of thirteen (13) days did not affect his credibility since witnesses in this country are usually reluctant to volunteer information about a criminal case or are unwilling to be involved in or dragged into criminal investigations which this Court took judicial notice. Moreover, the witness weathered a grueling cross-examination bordering on harassment and remained coherent and unfeigned throughout.[35]

A point of considerable importance is that the degree of fear and the probability of reprisal may cause the length of delay by the witness in revealing any information about the crime. In *People v. Chatto*,[36] the delay of five (5) years in executing an affidavit by the witness was deemed not to have affected her credibility. In that case, this Court adopted the findings of the trial court, to wit:

The span of time from 1985 to February 26, 1990 when Servillana executed her affidavit narrating about the heinous crime could be due to her fear, that the eight armed persons could just be marauding her barangay and

the vicinities.

With their firearms and the eight persons in the group who committed the crime could not be taken lightly especially in the rural areas where there is no protection of their safety liquidation squad, retribution or rub-out is not farfetched. The present situation becomes of public knowledge that life now is easily snap out by and through the presence of armed men marauding in the countryside and even in towns and urban areas.

This abnormal situation, and the propensity of armed men crisscrossing the barangays creates fear and even nervous wreck to some are present in the minds of the people.

Servillana's ordeal, an eyewitness to the execution of her husband in utter helplessness and despair in the prevailing circumstances, that affects the peace and order condition of the community logically explains the delay in executing her sworn statement.

The delay does not prove negatively, that the accused did not commit the crime, instead it bolstered her redress for grievances against the assailants, now that the police came to her aid giving her the opportunity to identify them in jail.[37]

In this case, appellant was the municipal mayor of the place where the crime was committed. At the time he committed the crime, he brought with him around ten bodyguards. As if nonchalantly, he shot the helpless victim mercilessly in front of several people including the witnesses who were police officers. He actually threatened to shoot SPO3 Daileg and SPO2 Padua when they tried to pacify him. As correctly observed by the Solicitor-General, appellant exercised moral dominance over these police officers because of his position.

Thus, SPO2 Felipe Padua testified on cross-examination as follows:

Q:

Will you tell the Court why is it that you did not report this incident of February 20, 1989 prior to July 21, 1993 to any Police or Military Officer?

A:

One thing, I was afraid of Mayor Natividad and another thing we have a change (sic) of command wherein our chief will be the one to report.

Q:

Did you know if your Chief of Police at that time who according to you was a certain Pagaduan reported the incident to your PNP Superiors or military authorities?

A:

I do not know, sir

Q:

Do you mean to tell the Court you did not bother to check from February 20, 1989 to July 21, 1993 whether Pagaduan reported this incident to your PNP Superiors or to any Police authorities?"

A:

I was afraid of Mayor Natividad, sir.

Q:

But you know for a fact that Pagaduan did not report to the Police authorities?

A:

I do not know, sir.

Q:

Will you tell the Court after February 20, 1989 did you happen to meet again Pagaduan?

A:

Yes, sir.

Q:

Did you ask him if he reported this incident that happened on February 20, 1989 to the Police authorities?

A:

I did not ask anymore because he was the chief. He should be the one to report the incident. They should be the one to report, sir.

Q: You said that he should be the one to report, what is your basis for saying that?

A:

Because they are higher to us, sir.

Q:

In other words, it was merely your conclusion that Pagaduan report the incident because he was on a higher rank than you were at that time, is that correct?

A: Yes, sir, he is the chief.

Q:

Is it not a fact that one of your duties as Police Officer is to report any commission of crime and to apprehend a person who committed a crime in your presence?

A: Yes, sir.

Q:

Will you tell us, did not these duties of Police Officer which according to you, you know occurred to you from the time this incident happened in February 20, 1989 up to July 20, 1993?

A:

I thought of that, sir, only I was afraid of Mayor Natividad.[38]

x x x

Q: Is it not a fact that Mayor Natividad the accused never threatened you of anything?

A:

That is it, sir. When we were pacifying him he told us we are tolerating this "even you I will kill you." [39]

Q:

Will you tell the Court why is it that you did not report this incident of February 20, 1989 prior to July 21,

1993 to any Police or Military Officer?

A:

One thing, I was afraid of Mayor Natividad and another thing we have a change (sic) of command wherein our chief will be the one to report.[40]

Q:

In other words, what you are trying to tell us is that you know that you must report the incident that you saw and apprehend the perpetrators of this alleged incident but because of your fear to Mayor Natividad you did not report this obligation of yours?

PROS. CAPULONG

Objection, on the ground that it was answered already. And it is argumentative, Your Honor.

COURT

Let the witness answer.

WITNESS

A: I was afraid of the Mayor. I feel that my family will be involved, sir.

ATTY. MAURICIO (continuing)

Q: Is it not a fact that Mayor Natividad the accused never threatened you of anything?

A: That is it, sir. When we were pacifying him he told us we are tolerating this "even you I will kill you." [41]

On this last point, SPO3 Reynaldo Daileg also testified on cross-examination, thus:

Q: The question to you is were you also threatened of your life?

A:

The Mayor told us at that time that if we reported that incident, we will be finished, sir.[42]

SPO2 Daniel Latosquin, for his part, stated:

Q: Did you not tell Rebuyaco of what you know about this incident involving Severino Aquino during his investigation?

A: No more, sir. Because of the words of the Mayor, were (sic) afraid.

Q: What words of the Mayor were you afraid of?

A: "Nobody will know this incident, if somebody will know you will be the one to be blamed."

Q: Tell us why are you testifying if you are afraid of the words of the Mayor?

A:

Because, sir, there was already an investigation and so that the truth will come out and that there will be justice.[43]

Notably, while these police officers did not conduct an investigation and file a case against the accused-appellant, all witnesses readily revealed what they knew when summoned to testify. They convinced the trial court that the facts they related were true and of their personal knowledge. Well-entrenched is the rule that findings of the trial

court as to the credibility of witnesses are accorded great weight, even finality, on appeal, unless the trial court has failed to appreciate certain facts and circumstances which, if taken into account, would materially affect the result of the case. Having had the opportunity to personally observe and analyze their demeanor and manner of testifying, the trial judge is in a better position to pass judgment on their credibility.[44] In this case, we find no reason to disturb the findings of the trial court.

There is no showing that the four (4) police officers had any motive to falsely charge appellant and the other accused of a crime. The presumption is that witnesses are not actuated by any improper motive absent any proof to the contrary, and that their testimonies must accordingly be met with considerable, if not conclusive, favor under the rules of evidence.[45]

Appellant also assails the credibility of the testimony of the prosecution witnesses. He claims that it is inconsistent with human experience for him to have killed Severino Aquino inside the Ramos PNP station in front of so many people; and later on, order the body to be thrown away to conceal the crime.

We are not persuaded. There is nothing inconsistent or incredible with the fact that after having shot the victim in front of many people, appellant ordered the body thrown away with the intention to conceal the crime. That appellant committed the crime in the presence of many people only speaks of his arrogance. He believed that, because of his position, these police officers would not squeal on him, which was exactly what happened in the case since the police officers undeniably kept silent for four long years. His order to throw the victim's body away was not surprising. For one who has committed a crime, to dispose of incriminating evidence is but natural.

Nonetheless, the witnesses' clear and categorical statements pointing to appellant as the one who shot the victim are strong and compelling evidence against him. Their testimonies establish his guilt beyond reasonable doubt.

Finally, we agree with the trial court in appreciating treachery as a qualifying circumstance. There is treachery when the offender commits any of the crimes against the person, employing means, methods, or forms in the execution thereof which tend directly and specially to insure its execution, without risk to himself arising from the defense which the offended party might take.[46] As found by the trial court, the victim at the time he was shot was in no position to defend himself. He was unarmed and too drunk to be aware that he would be shot by appellant inside the police station. Appellant thus insured that the killing of the victim was without any risk to himself. Treachery was, therefore, rightly appreciated by the trial court. Accordingly, the crime committed is murder qualified by treachery. Nevertheless, no civil indemnity may be awarded in view of the affidavit of desistance filed by the private complainant.

WHEREFORE, the Decision of the Regional Trial Court of Tarlac, Tarlac, Branch 64 in Criminal Case No. 17717 finding the accused-appellant ARNULFO "MIKE" NATIVIDAD guilty beyond reasonable doubt of murder and sentencing him to suffer the penalty of reclusion perpetua is hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., C.J., (Chairman), Puno, Pardo, and Ynares-Santiago, JJ., concur.

[1] The material portion of the information reads as follows:

"That on or about February 21, 1989 at around 10:00 o'clock in the evening, at the Ramos Police Station, Municipality of Ramos, Province of Tarlac, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the abovenamed accused Jun Cabaong fetched Severino L. Aquino from a singalong establishment and brought him to the headquarters of PNP Ramos, Tarlac. After a few minutes, accused Natividad together with

bodyguards arrived at the Police headquarters and with malice aforethought and with deliberate intent to take the life of one Severino L. Aquino, accused Natividad willfully, unlawfully, suddenly, unexpectedly, in a treacherous manner, attacked and shot the head of the latter with the use of a 9 MM pistol which as a consequence, said Severino L. Aquino sustained mortal wounds causing his instantaneous death.

That said Sesinando "Boy" Llerina and Vicente Millado without having participated in said crime as principal did then and there, unlawfully and feloniously take part subsequent to the commission by carrying the lifeless body of Severino Aquino into the municipal ambulance and drove the said vehicle towards a place somewhere in the vicinity of Brgy. San Miguel, Guimba, Nueva Ecija and dumped the lifeless body of Severino Aquino in said place with the intention of hiding the same.

That as a consequence of the aforementioned criminal act of the accused, the heirs of the deceased are entitled to recover civil damages pursuant to the provision of law.

Contrary to law." (Rollo, p. 12).

[2] TSN, Testimony of SPO2 Felipe Padua, January 10, 1994, p. 36.

[3] *Id.*, at 5-7.

[4] *Id.*, at 10.

[5] TSN, Testimony of SP03 Reynaldo Daileg, January 10, 1994, p. 20.

[6] TSN, Testimony of SP02 Felipe Padua, January 10, 1994, p. 10.

[7] *Id.*, at 3-15.7

[8] TSN, Testimony of SP03 Reynaldo Daileg, January 10, 1994, p. 22.

[9] *Id.*, at 23.

[10] *Id.*, at 12, 21-32.

[11] Exhibit "E;" Records, p. 240.

[12] TSN, Testimony of Myrna Aquino, January 14, 1994, pp. 3-11; See Exhibit "E."

[13] Exhibit "1," Records, p. 472.

[14] Decision, Regional Trial Court per Judge Arsenio P. Adriano, p. 5; Rollo, p. 23.

[15] *Id.*, at 4; *id.*, at 22.

[16] Rollo, p. 23.

[17] *Id.*, at 39-40.

[18] Appellant's Brief, pp. 5-11; Rollo, pp. 40-46.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Id.*

[21] *Supra.*

[22] Brief for the Plaintiff-Appellee, Office of the Solicitor General, p. 12; Rollo, p. 75.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Decision, Regional Trial Court, p. 4; Rollo, p. 22.

[25] 217 SCRA 170, 176-177 (1993).

[26] Ibid.

[27] 249 SCRA 54, 99 (1995).

[28] 151 SCRA 113, 135 (1987) citing *People v. Bulan and Rojas*, 108 Phil. 932 (1960).

[29] *Supra*.

[30] 249 SCRA 526, 533 (1995).

[31] 248 SCRA 77, 91 (1995). See also *People v. Gamboa*, 194 SCRA 372 (1991).

[32] 247 SCRA 628, 633 (1995).

[33] Ibid.

[34] 258 SCRA 1, 37 (1996).

[35] Ibid.

[36] 219 SCRA 785 (1993).

[37] *Id.*, at 793.

[38] TSN, January 10, 1994 A.M., pp. 15-17.

[39] *Id.*, at 18.

[40] *Id.*

[41] TSN, January 10, 1994, A.M., p. 18.

[42] TSN, January 10, 1994, P.M., pp. 44-45.

[43] TSN, January 12, 1994, p. 18.

[44] *People v. Batidor*, 303 SCRA 344 (1999).

[45] *People v. Baydo*, 273 SCRA 526 (1997).

[46] Revised Penal Code, Art. 14.

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