

SALVADOR D. FLOR, PETITIONER, VS. PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, RESPONDENT.

G.R. NO. 139987. March 31, 2005

Ponente: CHICO-NAZARIO, J.

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CHICO-NAZARIO, J.:

Before Us is a petition for review on certiorari seeking to reverse the Decision of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. CR Nos. 11577 and 33204[1] which affirmed the joint decision of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 33 of Pili, Camarines Sur, in Criminal Case No. P-1855 convicting the petitioner and Nick Ramos[2] for libel and Civil Case No. P-1672 awarding damages in favor of the private complainant, former Governor of Camarines Sur and Minister of the Presidential Commission on Government Reorganization Luis R. Villafuerte.

The facts are not disputed.

An information for libel was filed before the RTC, Branch 20, Naga City, against the petitioner and Ramos who were then the managing editor and correspondent, respectively, of the Bicol Forum, a local weekly newspaper circulated in the Bicol Region. The information reads as follows:

That on or about the 18th day up to the 24th day of August, 1986, in the Bicol Region comprised by the Provinces of Albay, Catanduanes, Sorsogon, Masbate, Camarines Sur, and Camarines Norte, and the Cities of Iriga and Naga, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court under R.A. No. 4363, and B.P. Blg. 129, the above-named accused who are the news correspondent and the managing editor, respectively, of the local weekly newspaper Bicol Forum, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously, without justifiable motive and with malicious intent of impeaching, discrediting and destroying the honor, integrity, good name and reputation of the complainant as Minister of the Presidential Commission on Government Reorganization and concurrently Governor of the Province of Camarines Sur, and to expose him to public hatred, ridicule and contempt, write, edit, publish and circulate an issue of the local weekly newspaper BICOL FORUM throughout the Bicol Region, with banner headline and front page news item read by the public throughout the Bicol Region, pertinent portions of which are quoted verbatim as follows:

“VILLAFUERTE’S DENIAL CONVINCES NO ONE”

NAGA CITY-Gov. Luis Villafuerte’s denial that he did not spend government money for his trips to Japan and Israel two weeks ago has failed to convince people in Camarines Sur, reliable sources said.

What the people know, the sources said, is that the two trips of the governor who is also the minister of the Government Reorganization Commission was purely junket.

This was confirmed when capitol sources disclosed that about P700,000.00 collected by way of cash advances by ranking provincial officials were allegedly used for the two trips.

The cash advances, the sources said, were made at the instance of Villafuerte.

It was learned that the amount was withdrawn without resolution approving its release.

Villafuerte however said that he spent his own money for the two trips.

The governor was accompanied abroad by political supporters mostly municipal mayors in Camarines Sur, the report said.

This was contested by several individuals who told Bicol Forum that the members of Villafuerte's entourage did not have official functions in the province.

Villafuerte and his companions reportedly attended the 1986 baseball games in Japan.

When in truth and in fact said allegations are false and utterly untrue as the complainant has not done such acts, thus embarrassing, discrediting and ridiculing him before his friends, followers and other people.[3]

The information was later amended to include Jose Burgos, Jr., who was at that time the publisher-editor of the Bicol Forum.[4] The trial court, however, never acquired jurisdiction over his person as he did not surrender nor was he ever arrested by the authorities.

It appears from the records that prior to the filing of the criminal complaint, the private complainant had already instituted a separate civil action for damages arising out of the questioned news article before the RTC, Branch 23, Naga City. Due to this, the criminal suit for libel was ordered consolidated with the civil case pursuant to Article 360 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended.[5] Subsequently, the consolidated actions were transferred to RTC, Branch 33, Pili, Camarines Sur, in accordance with Republic Act No. 4363 which outlines the venue of libel cases in the event that the offended party is a public official such as in this case.[6] Thereafter, a joint trial of the cases ensued with accused Burgos, Jr., being declared as in default in the civil case due to his failure to attend its pre-trial conference.

Upon being arraigned, the petitioner and Ramos both pleaded not guilty.[7]

During the trial, the private complainant himself took the witness stand to refute the statements contained in the subject news article. According to him, there were previous news reports and broadcasts regarding the cash advances allegedly made by some provincial government officials of Camarines Sur and that it was also reported that he made a trip to Japan which was branded as a mere "junket." [8] The private complainant, however, explained that after he clarified over the radio that he never went to Japan, the issue was never discussed again until the matter was included in the questioned news item. [9] As for the cash advances, the private complainant stated that the Provincial Auditor and the Budget Officer had already made a statement "to the effect that he had no pending cash advances." [10] Further, the private complainant clarified that he made his trip to Israel in his capacity as a cabinet member of former President Corazon C. Aquino and that he spent his own money for the said official trip thereby debunking Bicol Forum's report that his travel to Israel was purely a junket. [11] The private complainant also complained that no one from the Bicol Forum made any attempt to get his side of the story nor was he aware of any effort exerted by the representatives of said publication to confirm the veracity of the contents of the subject news article from any source at the provincial capitol. [12] Finally, the private complainant took exception to the banner headline which states "Villafuerte's Denial Convinces No One." According to him, the Bicol Forum seemed to be making a mockery of his previous explanations regarding the cash advances and his trips abroad and such a sweeping statement subjected him to public ridicule and humiliation. [13]

On the other hand, Ramos testified that he wrote the questioned news item on the basis of a note given to him by a source whom he refused to identify. [14] Said source was allegedly connected with the Provincial Treasurer's Office. [15] The note reads:

Media consultants of Villafuerte specially DWLV announcers had been announcing the travels of Villafuerte

to Israel and Japan without spending a single centavo. This is unbelievable as lately the Gov. said he [spent] his own money for the trips.

No one will believe this. The governor and party went to Israel and Japan as there were some P700,000.00 cash advances collected in form of advances by top provincial officials for the trips. No [doubt] Villafuerte had a hand on this because he is the governor approving cash advances. Among them were Panes and Maceda.

There were no resolution, please publish this that people concern will react and they be forced to account for the money. Authenticated papers will follow. Bull's eye ito.

capr[16]

Ramos likewise alleged that prior to writing the subject news article, he went to his source to ask some clarificatory questions and was told that he would be given authenticated records of the cash advances. Later, he was given a copy of the Schedule of Cash Advances of Disbursing Officers and Other Officers (as of June 30 1987).[17] Among the provincial government officials listed therein were the private respondent who had a 1986 balance of P25,000.00 incurred for cultural activities; Atty. Jose Maceda who also had a 1986 balance of P130,084.00 for sports development, Operation Smile, NAMCYA Festival, and prisoners' subsistence; and Eulogio Panes, Jr., who had beside his name a 1986 balance of P250,000 for the purpose of sports development. Ramos also claimed that when he went to the Provincial Treasurer's Office to conduct his investigation, he was shown some vouchers and was told that many of the members of the baseball delegation to Japan were not elected provincial officials and, in fact, some mayors and private individuals were sent as part of the Philippine group.[18]

During his turn at the witness stand, the petitioner admitted that the headline was written by him in his capacity as the managing editor[19] in accordance with the policy of their paper to print as headlines matters dealing with public concerns and public officials.[20] According to him, the banner headline and the sub-headline truthfully reflect the substance of the story prepared by Ramos.[21]

After the trial, the court a quo rendered a joint decision the dispositive portion of which reads:

IN VIEW OF ALL THE FOREGOING CONSIDERATIONS, judgment is hereby rendered:

In Criminal Case No. P-1855

Finding the accused Nick Ramos and Salvador D. Flor guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Libel defined and punished under Article 353 in connection with Article 355 of the Revised Penal Code and they are each sentenced to pay a fine of Two Thousand Pesos (P2,000.00) with subsidiary imprisonment in case of insolvency; and to pay the costs of suit.

In Civil Case No. P-1672

Ordering the defendants Nick Ramos, Salvador D. Flor and Jose Burgos, Jr. to pay jointly and severally to the plaintiff the following:

- The amount of Three Hundred Thousand Pesos (P300,000.00) as moral damages;
- The amount of Five Thousand Pesos (P5,000.00) as exemplary damages;
- The amount of Five Thousand Pesos (P5,000.00) as attorney's fees; and to pay the costs of suit.[22]

Unsatisfied with the findings of the trial court, the petitioner and Ramos filed an appeal with the Court of Appeals which affirmed the judgment of the trial court through its decision dated 10 December 1996.[23] They thereafter filed a motion for reconsideration[24] which was denied for lack of merit by the appellate court in its resolution of 19 August 1999.[25]

In upholding the conclusion reached by the trial court, the Court of Appeals ratiocinated, thus:

The informant of Nick Ramos made a sweeping conclusion that it was Gov. Villafuerte who made the trips abroad using government money as there were cash advances of P700,000.00 made by top provincial officials, without first having verified the truth about the matters contained in his report. The imputation became malicious when they are based on mere conjectures. The alleged libelous article must be construed as a whole. The effect of the news item upon the minds of the readers must be considered in the prosecution of libel cases. The words used in the news report tends to impute a criminal act on the governor which may cause the readers to hold him up to public ridicule and induce them to believe that the governor was indeed guilty. The accused editor admitted that he did not make any personal investigation as to the truth of the statements made in the report. When such communication was sent for publication, the so-called privilege was destroyed when malice in fact was present.[26]

In fine, the sole issue brought for the consideration of this Court is whether the questioned news item is libelous. We reverse.

Libel is defined as “a public and malicious imputation of a crime, or of a vice or defect, real or imaginary, or any act, omission, condition, status, or circumstance tending to cause the dishonor, discredit, or contempt of a natural person or juridical person, or to blacken the memory of one who is dead.”[27] Any of these imputations is defamatory and under the general rule stated in Article 354 of the Revised Penal Code, every defamatory imputation is presumed to be malicious.[28] The presumption of malice, however, does not exist in the following instances:

- A private communication made by any person to another in the performance of any legal, moral, or social duty; and
- A fair and true report, made in good faith, without any comments or remarks, of any judicial, legislative, or other official proceedings which are not of confidential nature, or of any statement, report, or speech delivered in said proceedings, or of any other act performed by public officers in the exercise of their functions.[29]

The law recognizes two kinds of privileged matters. First are those which are classified as absolutely privileged which enjoy immunity from libel suits regardless of the existence of malice in fact. Included herein are statements made in official proceedings of the legislature by the members thereof.[30] Likewise, statements made in the course of judicial proceedings are absolutely privileged but only if pertinent or relevant to the case involved.[31]

The other kind of privileged matters are the qualifiedly or conditionally privileged communications which, unlike the first classification, may be susceptible to a finding of libel provided the prosecution establishes the presence of malice in fact. The exceptions provided for in Article 354 of the Revised Penal Code fall into this category.

In the case, however, of *Borjal v. Court of Appeals*,[32] this Court recognized that the enumeration stated in Article 354 of the Revised Penal Code is not exclusive but is rendered more expansive by the constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press, thus:

. . . To be sure, the enumeration under Art. 354 is not an exclusive list of qualifiedly privileged communications since fair commentaries on matters of public interest are likewise privileged. The rule on privileged communications had its genesis not in the nation’s penal code but in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and of the press. As early as 1918, in *United States v. Cañete* [38 Phil. 253], this Court ruled that publications which are privileged for reasons of public policy are protected by the constitutional guaranty of freedom of speech. This constitutional right cannot be abolished by the mere failure of the legislature to give it express recognition in the statute punishing libels.[33]

Clearly, when confronted with libel cases involving publications which deal with public officials and the

discharge of their official functions, this Court is not confined within the wordings of the libel statute; rather, the case should likewise be examined under the constitutional precept of freedom of the press. As enunciated in the seminal case of *United States v. Bustos*[34] -

The interest of society and the maintenance of good government demand a full discussion of public affairs. Complete liberty to comment on the conduct of public men is a scalpel in the case of free speech. The sharp incision of its probe relieves the abscesses of officialdom. Men in public life may suffer under a hostile and an unjust accusation; the wound can be assuaged with the balm of a clear conscience. A public officer must not be too thin-skinned with reference to comment upon his official acts. Only thus can the intelligence and dignity of the individual be exalted. Of course, criticism does not authorize defamation. Nevertheless, as the individual is less than the State, so must expected criticism be born for the common good. Rising superior to any official, or set of officials, to the Chief Executive, to the Legislature, to the Judiciary – to any or all the agencies of Government – public opinion should be the constant source of liberty and democracy.[35]

Of course, this does not mean that a public official is barred from recovering damages in cases involving defamations. His entitlement, however, is limited to instances when the defamatory statement was made with actual malice – that is, with knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.[36] This is the test laid down in the leading case of *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*.[37]

In the case at bar, the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG) argues that the purported libelous news item was “designed to malign the integrity and reputation of the [private complainant]” for it ascribed to the latter corruption and dishonesty in government service.[38] Moreover, the OSG maintains that the questioned news article does not enjoy the mantle of protection afforded a privileged matter as the petitioner and Ramos published the news item based on mere speculation and conjecture.[39] Their decision to publish the unverified information furnished them by the unnamed source, who was never presented before the trial court, and their failure to verify the truth of statements which appeared under the banner headline of the 18-24 August 1986 issue of the *Bicol Forum* indicates that the news item was published “intemperately and maliciously.”[40] The OSG is therefore of the opinion that the subject news item satisfied the test pronounced in the *New York Times* case. We do not agree.

As the US Supreme Court itself declared, “reckless disregard ... cannot be fully encompassed in one infallible definition. Inevitably its outer limits will be marked out through case-by-case adjudication.”[41] The case of *Garrison v. State of Louisiana*[42] stressed that “only those false statements made with the high degree of awareness of their probable falsity demanded by *New York Times* may be the subject of either civil or criminal sanctions”[43] and concluded by restating the “reckless disregard standard” in the following manner:

... The test which we laid down in *New York Times* is not keyed to ordinary care; defeasance of the privilege is conditioned, not on mere negligence, but on reckless disregard for the truth.[44]

Subsequently, in *St. Amant v. Thompson*[45] it was stated that –

... These cases are clear that reckless conduct is not measured by whether a reasonably prudent man would have published, or would have investigated before publishing. There must be sufficient evidence to permit the conclusion that the defendant in fact entertained serious doubts as to the truth of his publication. Publishing with such doubts shows reckless disregard for truth or falsity and demonstrates actual malice. [46]

Applied to the case at bar, we hold that the prosecution failed to meet the criterion of “reckless disregard.” As the records reveal, the issue of cash advances against the coffers of the provincial government of Camarines Sur was a major political topic in said locality at that time. Even the private respondent himself admitted during his direct testimony that he went on radio in order to address the matter. It was clearly a legitimate topic to be discussed not only by the members of the media but by the public as what was involved was the dispensation of taxpayers’ money.

Further, it bears emphasis that in this case, the petitioner and Ramos had in their possession information relating to the cash advances and the private respondent's travels abroad. The information was provided by one who worked in the provincial treasurer's office and had access to the pertinent financial records of the provincial government. Their informant was familiar with the procedure with regard to the approval of cash advances. The inference they drew from the note given by their source that the private respondent prodded some of the provincial government officials to take out cash advances may have been false but the same does not warrant a conviction for libel nor support a claim for damages. As discussed by Newell –

Slight unintentional errors, however, will be excused. If a writer in the course of temperate and legitimate criticism falls into error as to some detail, or draws an incorrect inference from the facts before him, and thus goes beyond the limits of strict truth, such inaccuracies will not cause judgment to go against him, if the jury are satisfied, after reading the whole publication, that it was written honestly, fairly and with regard to what truth and justice require. "It is not to be expected that a public journalist will always be infallible." [47]

During the hearing of these cases, the private complainant also refuted the material points contained in the subject news article in an effort to prove the falsity of the allegations contained therein. This Court finds such effort inadequate to adjudge the petitioner guilty of the crime of libel or to entitle the private respondent to damages. Under the New York Times test, false statements alone are not actionable; maliciousness may be shown only through knowledge of falsity or reckless disregard of truth or falsity. [48]

Further, both the prosecution and the OSG make capital of Ramos and the petitioner's failure to confirm the information supplied by the unidentified source which ultimately became the basis for the news article under consideration in an obvious attempt to establish the element of "reckless disregard for truth." The prosecution also painstakingly tried to establish malice in fact on the part of the petitioner by harping on the fact that neither he nor Ramos took the time to give the private respondent the chance to air his side before putting the alleged libelous news story to print.

The contention fails to persuade.

While substantiation of the facts supplied is an important reporting standard, still, a reporter may rely on information given by a lone source although it reflects only one side of the story provided the reporter does not entertain a "high degree of awareness of [its] probable falsity." [49] The prosecution, in this case, utterly failed to prove that the petitioner and Ramos entertained such awareness.

We also hold that the petitioner's and Ramos's failure to present their informant before the court as well as other evidence that would prove Ramos' claim that he had conducted an investigation to verify the information passed on to him should not be taken against them. On this point, we turn to our pronouncement in the case of *Rodolfo R. Vasquez v. Court of Appeals, et al.*, [50] to wit:

A rule placing on the accused the burden of showing the truth of allegations of official misconduct and/or good motives and justifiable ends for making such allegations would not only be contrary to Art. 361 of the Revised Penal Code. It would, above all, infringe on the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression. Such a rule would deter citizens from performing their duties as members of a self-governing community. Without free speech and assembly, discussions of our most abiding concerns as a nation would be stifled. As Justice Brandeis has said, "public discussion is a political duty" and "the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people." [51]

Indeed, the difficulty of producing evidence, both documentary and testimonial, on behalf of the petitioner was readily apparent when, during his cross-examination, Ramos testified that he was not allowed by the custodians of the material provincial financial records to photocopy the latter particularly because said documents dealt with the

matter of cash advances.[52]

Further, as their informant was employed in the provincial treasurer's office, it is understandable why he opted not to expose himself and openly charge his superior, the private complainant herein, lest he incur the latter's wrath.

Finally, the private respondent claims that the banner headline ridiculed him before the public does not merit consideration as the rule in this jurisdiction is that "[t]he headline of a newspaper story or publication claimed to be libelous must be read and construed in connection with the language that follows." [53] A perusal of the entire news story accompanying the headline in this case readily establishes the fact that the questioned article dealt with refutations by the private respondent's critics of his explanation over the radio with regard to the issues mentioned therein. The wording of the headline may have contained an exaggeration but the same nevertheless represents a fair index of the contents of the news story accompanying it.[54]

WHEREFORE, the petition is GRANTED. The Decision of the Court of Appeals of 10 December 1996 which affirmed the Joint Decision dated 18 March 1991 of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 33, Pili, Camarines Sur, and its Resolution of 19 August 1999 denying reconsideration are REVERSED and SET ASIDE. No costs.

SO ORDERED.

Puno, (Chairman), Austria-Martinez, Callejo, Sr., and Tinga, JJ., concur.

[1] Penned by Associate Justice Maximiano C. Asuncion with Associate Justices Artemon D. Luna and Ramon A. Barcelona, concurring.

[2]

Nick Ramos died prior to the resolution of their Motion for Reconsideration before the Court of Appeals; Rollo, p. 12.

[3] Records, pp. 3-4.

[4] Records, pp. 150-152.

[5] The pertinent portion of Article 360 of the Revised Penal Code states: "... Provided, further, That the civil action shall be filed in the same court where the criminal action is filed and vice versa: Provided, furthermore, That the court where the criminal action or civil action for damages is first filed, shall acquire jurisdiction to the exclusion of other courts..."

[6] Article 360, par. 3 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended by R.A. No. 4363 provides: "The criminal and civil action for damages in cases of written defamations as provided for in this chapter, shall be filed simultaneously or separately with the Court of First Instance of the province or city where the libelous article is printed and first published or where any of the offended parties actually resides at the time of the commission of the offense: Provided, however, That where one of the offended parties is a public officer whose office is in the City of Manila at the time of the commission of the offense, the action shall be filed in the Court of First Instance of the City of Manila or of the city or province where the libelous article is printed and first published, and in case such public officer does not hold office in the City of Manila, the action shall be filed in the Court of First Instance of the province or city where he held office at the time of the commission of the offense or where the libelous article is printed and first published and in case one of the offended parties is a private individual, the action shall be filed in the Court of First Instance of the province or city where he actually resides at the time of the commission of the offense or where the libelous matter is printed and first published: Provided, further, That the civil action shall be

filed in the same court where the criminal action is filed and vice versa: Provided, furthermore, That the court where the criminal action or civil action for damages is first filed, shall acquire jurisdiction to the exclusion of other courts: And provided, finally, That this amendment shall not apply to cases of written defamations, the civil and/or criminal actions for which have been filed in court at the time of the effectivity of this law.

[7] Records, p. 172.

[8] TSN, 26 July 1990, p. 25.

[9] Id. at 26.

[10] Id. at 27.

[11] Id. at 34-37.

[12] Id. at 40-41.

[13] Id. at 43.

[14] TSN, 8 August 1990, p. 9.

[15] Id. at 12.

[16] Exhibit “4” for the petitioner.

[17] Exhibit “5” for the petitioner.

[18] Supra, note 14, p. 16.

[19] TSN, 20 September 1990, p. 16.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Id. at 17.

[22] Rollo, pp. 38-39.

[23] Rollo, pp. 40-45.

[24] Rollo, pp. 46-47.

[25] Rollo, pp. 48-51.

[26] Rollo, pp. 44-45.

[27] Article 353 of the Revised Penal Code.

[28] Dr. Merle A. Alonzo v. Court of Appeals, et al., G.R. No. 110088; 1 February 1995, 241 SCRA 51.

[29] Article 354 of the Revised Penal Code.

[30] Article VI, Section 11 of the 1987 Constitution.

[31] Regalado, Florenz, Criminal Law Conspectus, p. 646 (1st Ed.).

[32] G.R. No. 126466, 14 January 1999, 301 SCRA 1.

[33] Id. at 22.

[34] G.R. No. L-12592, 08 March 1918, 37 Phil. 731.

[35] Id. at 740-741.

[36] New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 US 254, 11 L ed. 2d 686.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Comment, p. 10; Rollo p. 67.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Id. at 12; Rollo, p. 69.

[41] St. Amant v. Thompson, 390 US 727, 20 L Ed 2 262.

[42] 379 US 64, 13 L ed 2d 125.

[43] 379 US 64, 13 L ed 2d, 125, 133.

[44] Id. at 135.

[45] Supra, note 41.

[46] Id. at 267.

[47] Newell, Slander and Libel, p. 523, 4th edition.

[48] Washington Post Company v. Keogh, 365 F.2d 965 (1966).

[49] New York Times Company v. Connor, 365 F. 2d 567, 576.

[50] G.R. No. 118971, 15 September 1999, 314 SCRA 460.

[51] Id. at 477.

[52] TSN, 15 August 1990, pp. 41, 45-46.

[53] Norberto Quisumbing v. Eugenio Lopez, et al., G.R. No. L-6465, 31 January 1955, 96 Phil. 510.

[54] 50 Am Jur 2d §253.

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