

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. CARLOS R. VEGA, MARCOS R. VEGA, ROGELIO R. VEGA, LUBIN R. VEGA, HEIRS OF GLORIA R. VEGA, NAMELY: FRANCISCO L. YAP, MA. WINONA Y. RODR...

G.R. No. 177790. January 17, 2011

Ponente: SERENO, J.

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SERENO, J.:

This is a Rule 45 Petition filed by the Republic of the Philippines (petitioner Republic), through the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG), questioning the Decision of the Court of Appeals,[1] which affirmed a lower court's grant of an application for original registration of title covering a parcel of land located in Los Baños, Laguna.

The facts of the case as culled from the records of the trial court and the appellate court are straightforward and without much contention from the parties.

On 26 May 1995, respondents Carlos R. Vega, Marcos R. Vega, Rogelio R. Vega, Lubin R. Vega and Heirs of Gloria R. Vega - namely, Francisco L. Yap, Ma. Winona Y. Rodriguez, Ma. Wendelyn V. Yap and Francisco V. Yap, Jr. (respondents Vegas) - filed an application for registration of title. The application covered a parcel of land, identified as Lot No. 6191, Cadastre 450 of Los Baños, Laguna, with a total area of six thousand nine hundred two (6,902) square meters (the subject land). The case was docketed as Land Registration Case No. 103-95-C and raffled to the Regional Trial Court of Calamba, Laguna, Branch 92.

Respondents Vegas alleged that they inherited the subject land from their mother, Maria Revilla Vda. de Vega, who in turn inherited it from her father, Lorenzo Revilla. Their mother's siblings (two brothers and a sister) died intestate, all without leaving any offspring.

On 21 June 1995, petitioner Republic filed an opposition to respondents Vegas' application for registration on the ground, inter alia, that the subject land or portions thereof were lands of the public domain and, as such, not subject to private appropriation.

During the trial court hearing on the application for registration, respondents Vegas presented several exhibits in compliance with the jurisdictional requirements, as well as witnesses to prove respondents Vegas' ownership, occupation and possession of the land subject of the registration. Significant was the testimony of Mr. Rodolfo Gonzales, a Special Investigator of the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) of Los Baños, Laguna, under the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). He attested to having conducted an inspection of the subject land[2] and identified the corresponding Report dated 13 January 1997, which he had submitted to the Regional Executive Director, Region IV. The report stated that the area subject of the investigation was entirely within the alienable and disposable zone, and that there was no public land application filed for the same land by the applicant or by any other person.[3]

During the trial, respondents-intervenors Romea G. Buhay-Ocampo, Francisco G. Buhay, Arceli G.

Buhay-Rodriguez, Orlando G. Buhay, Soledad G. Buhay-Vasquez, Loida G. Buhay-Senadosa, Florendo G. Buhay, Oscar G. Buhay, Erlyn Buhay-Ginorga, Evelyn Buhay-Grantea and Emilie Buhay-Dallas (respondents-intervenors Buhays) entered their appearance and moved to intervene in respondents Vegas' application for registration.[4] Respondents-intervenors Buhays claimed a portion of the subject land consisting of eight hundred twenty-six (826) square meters, purportedly sold by respondents Vegas' mother (Maria Revilla Vda. de Vega) to the former's predecessors-in-interest - the sisters Gabriela Gilvero and Isabel Gilverio - by virtue of a "Bilihan ng Isang Bahagi ng Lupang Katihan" dated 14 January 1951.[5] They likewise formally offered in evidence Subdivision Plan Csd-04-024336-D, which indicated the portion of the subject land, which they claimed was sold to their predecessors-in-interest.[6]

In a Decision dated 18 November 2003, the trial court granted respondents Vegas' application and directed the Land Registration Authority (LRA) to issue the corresponding decree of registration in the name of respondents Vegas and respondents-intervenors Buhays' predecessors, in proportion to their claims over the subject land.

Petitioner Republic appealed the Decision of the trial court, arguing that respondents Vegas failed to prove that the subject land was alienable and disposable, since the testimony of Mr. Gonzales did not contain the date when the land was declared as such. Unpersuaded by petitioner Republic's arguments, the Court of Appeals affirmed in toto the earlier Decision of the trial court. Aggrieved by the ruling, petitioner filed the instant Rule 45 Petition with this Court.

Respondents Vegas, who are joined by respondents-intervenors Buhays (collectively, respondents), raise procedural issues concerning the filing of the instant Petition, which the Court shall resolve first. Briefly, respondents found, in the instant Petition, procedural deficiencies that ought to warrant its outright dismissal. These deficiencies are as follows: (a) petitioner Republic failed to include the pertinent portions of the record that would support its arguments under Rule 45, Section 4 (d) of the Rules of Court, specifically the Appellee's Brief of respondents Vegas in the appellate proceedings; and (b) it raised questions of fact, which are beyond the purview of a Rule 45 Petition.[7]

The Court is not persuaded by respondents' arguments concerning the purported defects of the Petition.

First, petitioner Republic's failure to attach a copy of respondents Vegas' Appellee's Brief to the instant Petition is not a fatal mistake, which merits the immediate dismissal of a Rule 45 Petition. The requirement that a petition for review on certiorari should be accompanied by "such material portions of the record as would support the petition" is left to the discretion of the party filing the petition.[8] Except for the duplicate original or certified true copy of the judgment sought to be appealed from,[9] there are no other records from the court a quo that must perforce be attached before the Court can take cognizance of a Rule 45 petition.

Respondents cannot fault petitioner Republic for excluding pleadings, documents or records in the lower court, which to their mind would assist this Court in deciding whether the Decision appealed from is sound. Petitioner Republic is left to its own estimation of the case in deciding which records would support its Petition and should thus be attached thereto. In any event, respondents are not prevented from attaching to their pleadings pertinent portions of the records that they deem necessary for the Court's evaluation of the case, as was done by respondents Vegas in this case when they attached their Appellee's Brief to their Comment. In the end, it is the Court, in finally resolving the merits of the suit that will ultimately decide whether the material portions of the records attached are sufficient to support the Petition.

Second, the Petition raises a question of law, and not a question of fact. Petitioner Republic simply takes issue against the conclusions made by the trial and the appellate courts regarding the nature and character of the subject parcel of land, based on the evidence presented. When petitioner asks for a review of the decisions made by a

lower court based on the evidence presented, without delving into their probative value but simply on their sufficiency to support the legal conclusions made, then a question of law is raised.

In *New Rural Bank of Guimba (N.E.) Inc. v. Fermina S. Abad and Rafael Susan*,^[10] the Court reiterated the distinction between a question of law and a question of fact in this wise:

We reiterate the distinction between a question of law and a question of fact. A question of law exists when the doubt or controversy concerns the correct application of law or jurisprudence to a certain set of facts; or when the issue does not call for an examination of the probative value of the evidence presented, the truth or falsehood of the facts being admitted. A question of fact exists when a doubt or difference arises as to the truth or falsehood of facts or when the query invites calibration of the whole evidence considering mainly the credibility of the witnesses, the existence and relevancy of specific surrounding circumstances, as well as their relation to each other and to the whole, and the probability of the situation. (Emphasis supplied)

Petitioner Republic is not calling for an examination of the probative value or truthfulness of the evidence presented, specifically the testimony of Mr. Gonzales. It, however, questions whether the evidence on record is sufficient to support the lower court's conclusion that the subject land is alienable and disposable. Otherwise stated, considering the evidence presented by respondents Vegas in the proceedings below, were the trial and the appellate courts justified under the law and jurisprudence in their findings on the nature and character of the subject land? Undoubtedly, this is a pure question of law, which calls for a resolution of what is the correct and applicable law to a given set of facts.

Going now to the substantial merits, petitioner Republic places before the Court the question of whether, based on the evidence on record, respondents Vegas have sufficiently established that the subject land is alienable and disposable. Was it erroneous for the Court of Appeals to have affirmed the trial court's grant of registration applied for by respondents Vegas over the subject land? We find no reversible error on the part of either the trial court or the Court of Appeals.

Presidential Decree No. 1529, otherwise known as the Property Registration Decree, provides for the instances when a person may file for an application for registration of title over a parcel of land:

Section 14. Who May Apply. -- The following persons may file in the proper Court of First Instance an application for registration of title to land, whether personally or through their duly authorized representatives:

Those who by themselves or through their predecessors-in-interest have been in open, continuous, exclusive and notorious possession and occupation of alienable and disposable lands of the public domain under a bona fide claim of ownership since June 12, 1945, or earlier. x x x.

Thus, pursuant to the afore-quoted provision of law, applicants for registration of title must prove the following: (1) that the subject land forms part of the disposable and alienable lands of the public domain; and (2) that they have been in open, continuous, exclusive and notorious possession and occupation of the land under a bona fide claim of ownership since 12 June 1945 or earlier.^[11] Section 14 (1) of the law requires that the property sought to be registered is already alienable and disposable at the time the application for registration is filed.^[12]

Raising no issue with respect to respondents Vegas' open, continuous, exclusive and notorious possession of the subject land in the present Petition, the Court will limit its focus on the first requisite: specifically, whether it has sufficiently been demonstrated that the subject land is alienable and disposable.

Unless a land is reclassified and declared alienable and disposable, occupation of the same in the concept of an owner - no matter how long - cannot ripen into ownership and result in a title; public lands not shown to have been classified as alienable and disposable lands remain part of the inalienable domain and cannot confer ownership or

possessory rights.[13]

Matters of land classification or reclassification cannot be assumed; they call for proof.[14] To prove that the land subject of an application for registration is alienable, an applicant must conclusively establish the existence of a positive act of the government, such as any of the following: a presidential proclamation or an executive order; other administrative actions; investigation reports of the Bureau of Lands investigator; or a legislative act or statute.[15] The applicant may also secure a certification from the government that the lands applied for are alienable and disposable.[16]

Previously, a certification from the DENR that a lot was alienable and disposable was sufficient to establish the true nature and character of the property and enjoyed the presumption of regularity in the absence of contradictory evidence.[17]

However, in *Republic v. T.A.N. Properties, Inc.*, [18] the Supreme Court overturned the grant by the lower courts of an original application for registration over a parcel of land in Batangas and ruled that a CENRO certification is not enough to certify that a land is alienable and disposable:

Further, it is not enough for the PENRO or CENRO to certify that a land is alienable and disposable. The applicant for land registration must prove that the DENR Secretary had approved the land classification and released the land of the public domain as alienable and disposable, and that the land subject of the application for registration falls within the approved area per verification through survey by the PENRO or CENRO. In addition, the applicant for land registration must present a copy of the original classification approved by the DENR Secretary and certified as a true copy by the legal custodian of the official records. These facts must be established to prove that the land is alienable and disposable. Respondent failed to do so because the certifications presented by respondent do not, by themselves, prove that the land is alienable and disposable. (Emphasis supplied)

Thus, as it now stands, aside from a CENRO certification, an application for original registration of title over a parcel of land must be accompanied by a copy of the original classification approved by the DENR Secretary and certified as a true copy by the legal custodian of the official records in order to establish that the land indeed is alienable and disposable.[19]

To comply with the first requisite for an application for original registration of title under the Property Registration Decree, respondents Vegas should have submitted a CENRO certification and a certified true copy of the original classification by the DENR Secretary that the land is alienable and disposable, together with their application. However, as pointed out by the Court of Appeals, respondents Vegas failed to submit a CENRO certification -- much less an original classification by the DENR Secretary -- to prove that the land is classified as alienable and disposable land of the public domain.[20] If the stringent rule imposed in *Republic v. T.A.N. Properties, Inc.*, is to be followed, the absence of these twin certifications justifies a denial of an application for registration. Significantly, however, the Court's pronouncement in *Republic v. T.A.N. Properties, Inc.*, was issued after the decisions of the trial court[21] and the appellate court[22] in this case.

Recently, however, in *Republic v. Serrano*, [23] the Court affirmed the findings of the trial and the appellate courts that the parcel of land subject of registration was alienable and disposable. The Court held that a DENR Regional Technical Director's certification, which is annotated on the subdivision plan submitted in evidence, constitutes substantial compliance with the legal requirement:

While Cayetano failed to submit any certification which would formally attest to the alienable and disposable character of the land applied for, the Certification by DENR Regional Technical Director Celso V. Loriga, Jr., as annotated on the subdivision plan submitted in evidence by Paulita, constitutes substantial compliance with the legal requirement. It clearly indicates that Lot 249 had been verified as belonging to the alienable and

disposable area as early as July 18, 1925.

The DENR certification enjoys the presumption of regularity absent any evidence to the contrary. It bears noting that no opposition was filed or registered by the Land Registration Authority or the DENR to contest respondents' applications on the ground that their respective shares of the lot are inalienable. There being no substantive rights which stand to be prejudiced, the benefit of the Certification may thus be equitably extended in favor of respondents. (Emphasis supplied)

Indeed, the best proofs in registration proceedings that a land is alienable and disposable are a certification from the CENRO or Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office (PENRO) and a certified true copy of the DENR's original classification of the land. The Court, however, has nonetheless recognized and affirmed applications for land registration on other substantial and convincing evidence duly presented without any opposition from the LRA or the DENR on the ground of substantial compliance.

Applying these precedents, the Court finds that despite the absence of a certification by the CENRO and a certified true copy of the original classification by the DENR Secretary, there has been substantial compliance with the requirement to show that the subject land is indeed alienable and disposable based on the evidence on record.

First, respondents Vegas were able to present Mr. Gonzales of the CENRO who testified that the subject land is alienable and disposable, and who identified his written report on his inspection of the subject land.

In the Report,[24] Mr. Gonzales attested under oath that (1) the "area is entirely within the alienable and disposable zone" as classified under Project No. 15, L.C. Map No. 582, certified on 31 December 1925;[25] (2) the land has never been forfeited in favor of the government for non-payment of taxes; (3) the land is not within a previously patented/decreed/titled property;[26] (4) there are no public land application/s filed by the applicant for the same land;[27] and (5) the land is residential/commercial.[28] That Mr. Gonzales appeared and testified before an open court only added to the reliability of the Report, which classified the subject land as alienable and disposable public land. The Court affirms the Court of Appeals' conclusion that Mr. Gonzales' testimony and written report under oath constituted substantial evidence to support their claim as to the nature of the subject land.

Second, Subdivision Plan Csd-04-02433-6, formally offered as evidence by respondents-intervenors Buhays,[29] expressly indicates that the land is alienable and disposable. Similar to *Republic v. Serrano*, Mr. Samson G. de Leon, the officer-in-charge of the Office of the Assistant Regional Executive Director for Operations of the DENR, approved the said subdivision plan, which was annotated with the following proviso: "[T]his survey is inside alienable and disposable area as per Project No. 15, L.C. Map No. 582, certified on Dec. 31, 1925." Notably, Mr. De Leon's annotation pertaining to the identification of the land as alienable and disposable coincides with the investigation report of Mr. Gonzales.

Finally, upon being informed of respondents Vegas' application for original registration, the LRA never raised the issue that the land subject of registration was not alienable and disposable. In the Supplementary Report submitted during the trial court proceedings,[30] the LRA did not interpose any objection to the application on the basis of the nature of the land. It simply noted that the subject subdivision plan (Psu-51460) had also been applied for in Case No. 1469, GLRO Record No. 32505, but that there was no decree of registration issued therefor. Thus, the LRA recommended that "should the instant case be given due course, the application in Case No. 1469, GLRO Record No. 32505 with respect to plan Psu-51460 be dismissed." In addition, not only did the government fail to cross-examine Mr. Gonzales, it likewise chose not to present any countervailing evidence to support its opposition. In contrast to the other cases brought before this Court,[31] no opposition was raised by any interested

government body, aside from the pro forma opposition filed by the OSG.

The onus in proving that the land is alienable and disposable still remains with the applicant in an original registration proceeding; and the government, in opposing the purported nature of the land, need not adduce evidence to prove otherwise.[32] In this case though, there was no effective opposition, except the pro forma opposition of the OSG, to contradict the applicant's claim as to the character of the public land as alienable and disposable. The absence of any effective opposition from the government, when coupled with respondents' other pieces of evidence on record persuades this Court to rule in favor of respondents.

In the instant Petition, petitioner Republic also assails the failure of Mr. Gonzales to testify as to when the land was declared as alienable and disposable. Indeed, his testimony in open court is bereft of any detail as to when the land was classified as alienable and disposable public land, as well as the date when he conducted the investigation. However, these matters could have been dealt with extensively during cross-examination, which petitioner Republic waived because of its repeated absences and failure to present counter evidence.[33] In any event, the Report, as well as the Subdivision Plan, readily reveals that the subject land was certified as alienable and disposable as early as 31 December 1925 and was even classified as residential and commercial in nature.

Thus, the Court finds that the evidence presented by respondents Vegas, coupled with the absence of any countervailing evidence by petitioner Republic, substantially establishes that the land applied for is alienable and disposable and is the subject of original registration proceedings under the Property Registration Decree. There was no reversible error on the part of either the trial court or the appellate court in granting the registration.

Respondents-intervenors Buhays' title to that portion of the subject land is likewise affirmed, considering that the joint claim of respondents-intervenors Buhays over the land draws its life from the same title of respondents Vegas, who in turn failed to effectively oppose the claimed sale of that portion of the land to the former's predecessors-in-interest.

It must be emphasized that the present ruling on substantial compliance applies *pro hac vice*. It does not in any way detract from our rulings in *Republic v. T.A.N. Properties, Inc.*, and similar cases which impose a strict requirement to prove that the public land is alienable and disposable, especially in this case when the Decisions of the lower court and the Court of Appeals were rendered prior to these rulings.[34] To establish that the land subject of the application is alienable and disposable public land, the general rule remains: all applications for original registration under the Property Registration Decree must include both (1) a CENRO or PENRO certification and (2) a certified true copy of the original classification made by the DENR Secretary.

As an exception, however, the courts - in their sound discretion and based solely on the evidence presented on record - may approve the application, *pro hac vice*, on the ground of substantial compliance showing that there has been a positive act of government to show the nature and character of the land and an absence of effective opposition from the government. This exception shall only apply to applications for registration currently pending before the trial court prior to this Decision and shall be inapplicable to all future applications.

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant Petition is DENIED. The Court of Appeals' Decision dated 30 April 2007 and the trial court's Decision dated 18 November 2003 are hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio Morales, (Chairperson), Brion, Bersamin, and Villarama, Jr., JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo at 28-40.

- [2] TSN, 24 July 2000, at 5-6.
- [3] Exhibit "CC" (Report dated 13 January 1997), Regional Trial Court records at 125.
- [4] Motion for Intervention dated 14 August 1998 and Opposition dated 14 April 1998 (Exhibits "7" and "8"), Regional Trial Court records, at 158-170.
- [5] Exhibit "1," Regional Trial Court records, at 167-168.
- [6] Exhibit "5," Regional Trial Court records, at 418.
- [7] Comment dated 03 September 2007, rollo at 44-55.
- [8] Rule 45, Sec. 4 (d) of the Rules of Court.
- [9] "The petition shall ... (d) be accompanied by a clearly legible duplicate original, or a certified true copy of the judgment or final order or resolution certified by the clerk of court of the court a quo and the requisite number of plain copies thereof, and such material portions of the record as would support the petition; ..." (Rule 45, Sec. 1 [d] of the Rules of Court)
- [10] G.R. No. 161818, 20 August 2008, 562 SCRA 503.
- [11] Republic v. Hanover Worldwide Trading Corporation, G.R. No. 172102, 02 July 2010; Lim v. Republic, G.R. Nos. 158630 & 162047, 04 September 2009, 598 SCRA 247; Republic v. Heirs of Juan Fabio, G.R. No. 159589, 23 December 2008, 575 SCRA 51; Llanes v. Republic, G.R. No. 177947, 27 November 2008, 572 SCRA 258; Republic v. Diloy, G.R. No. 174633, 26 August 2008, 563 SCRA 413; Ong v. Republic, G.R. No. 175746, 12 March 2008, 548 SCRA 160; Republic v. Lao, G.R. No. 150413, 01 July 2003, 405 SCRA 291.
- [12] Republic v. Diloy, G.R. No. 174633, 26 August 2008, 563 SCRA 413; Republic v. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 144057, 17 January 2005, 448 SCRA 442.
- [13] Republic v. Heirs of Juan Fabio, G.R. No. 159589, 23 December 2008, 575 SCRA 51; Secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources v. Yap, G.R. Nos. 167707 & 173775, 08 October, 2008, 568 SCRA 164.
- [14] Republic v. Naguiat, G.R. No. 134209, 24 January 2006, 479 SCRA 585, citing Director of Lands v. Funtilar, 142 SCRA 57 (1986).
- [15] Republic v. Candymaker, Inc., G.R. No. 163766, 22 June 2006, 492 SCRA 272, citing Republic v. Court of Appeals, 440 Phil. 697, 710-711 (2002); Tan v. Republic, G.R. No. 177797, 04 December 2008, 573 SCRA 89; Buenaventura v. Pascual, G.R. No. 168819, 27 November 2008, 572 SCRA 143; Republic v. Muñoz, G.R. No. 151910, 15 October 2007, 536 SCRA 108.
- [16] Republic v. Tri-Plus Corporation, G.R. No. 150000, 26 September 2006, 503 SCRA 91; Zarate v. Director of Lands, G.R. No. 131501, 14 July 2004, 434 SCRA 322.
- [17] Tan v. Republic, G.R. No. 177797, 04 December 2008, 573 SCRA 89; Spouses Recto v. Republic, G.R. No. 160421, 04 October 2004, 440 SCRA 79.
- [18] G.R. No. 154953, 26 June 2008, 555 SCRA 477.
- [19] See Republic v. Heirs of Fabio, *supra* note 11; Republic v. Hanover Worldwide Trading Corporation, G.R. No. 172102, 02 July 2010; Republic v. Roche, G.R. No. 175846, 06 July 2010.
- [20] CA Decision, at 12; rollo at 39.

[21] RTC Decision dated 18 November 2003.

[22] CA Decision dated 30 April 2007; rollo at 28-40.

[23] G.R. No. 183063, 24 February 2010.

[24] Exhibit "CC," Regional Trial Court records, at 125.

[25] Exhibit "CC-1," id.

[26] Exhibit "CC-2," id.

[27] Exhibit "CC-3," id.

[28] Exhibit "CC-4," id.

[29] Exhibit "5," Regional Trial Court records at 418.

[30] Exhibit "AA," Regional Trial Court records at 107-108.

[31] In *Republic v. Roche*, G.R. No. 175846, 06 July 2010, the Laguna Lake Development Authority also opposed Roche's application on the ground that, based on technical descriptions, her land was located below the reglamentary lake elevation of 12.50 meters and, therefore, may be deemed part of the Laguna Lake bed under Section 41 of Republic Act No. 4850. In *Republic v. Hanover*, supra note 19, the Republic was represented by the OSG and the DENR in opposing the application for registration.

[32] *Republic v. Roche*, G.R. No. 175846, 06 July 2010.

[33] Decision dated 18 November 2003, Regional Trial Court records at 442-443.

[34] As earlier stated, the RTC and CA Rulings were promulgated before *Republic v. T.A.N. Properties, Inc.*

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