

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. CIPRIANO CARDENAS Y GOFRERICA, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.*G.R. No. 190342. March 21, 2012*

Ponente: SERENO, J.

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This is an appeal from the Decision[1] dated 19 February 2009 of the Court of Appeals (CA) Second Division in CA-G.R. CR-H.C. No. 02634, which affirmed the conviction of accused-appellant for violation of Section 5, Article II of Republic Act No. 9165 (R.A. 9165), the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002. Appellant was convicted by the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Quezon City, Branch 103 in Criminal Case No. Q-03-114312 for selling the prohibited drug methylamphetamine hydrochloride or shabu.[2]

The Facts

On 07 January 2003, an Information was filed against accused Cipriano Cardena y Gofrerica, alias “Ope,” for violation of Section 5, Article II of R.A. 9165, allegedly committed as follows:

That on or about the 6[th] day of January, 2003 in Quezon City, Philippines, the said accused, not being authorized by law to sell, dispense, deliver, transport or distribute any dangerous drug, did, then and there, willfully, and unlawfully sell, dispense, deliver, transport, distribute or act as broker in the said transaction, zero point zero five (0.05) gram of white crystalline substance containing Methylamphetamine Hydrochloride otherwise known as “SHABU” a dangerous drug.

CONTRARY TO LAW.[3]

Upon arraignment, the accused pleaded “Not guilty” to the crime charged.[4]

Prosecution’s Version of the Facts

The evidence for the prosecution shows that around 12 p.m. of 06 January 2003, the Detection and Special Operations Division of the Criminal Investigation Division Group (DSOD-CIDG) in Camp Crame received a report from its confidential informant regarding the rampant selling of shabu by a certain Cipriano Cardenas (a.k.a. “Ope”) at the Payatas Area in Quezon City. Acting on the information, a team was organized to conduct a buy-bust operation. Police Officer (PO) 3 Edgardo Palacio was head of the team and PO3 Rene Enteria was designated to act as the poseur-buyer.[5] They marked a P100 bill with the initials “ERP” on the lower right portion of its dorsal side and used the money in the buy-bust operation.[6] The team agreed that upon the consummation of the sale, PO3 Enteria would throw away his cigarette to signal the moment at which the drug pusher would be arrested.[7]

The team proceeded to Lupang Pangako, Barangay Payatas, Quezon City to conduct the buy-bust operation. At the site, PO3 Enteria was guided by the confidential informant and closely followed by PO3 Palacio and two other team members. They chanced upon the accused wearing camouflage pants and standing near a small house located on a pathway.[8] Approaching the accused, the informant introduced the police officer as the person

interested to buy shabu. PO3 Enteria was asked how much he wanted to buy, and he answered “P100.” The accused then took out a clear plastic sachet containing a white crystalline substance from his pocket and handed it to PO3 Enteria. After handing the marked ₱100 bill to the accused, the police officer threw away his cigarette as a signal of the consummation of the buy-bust operation.[9]

PO3 Palacio and the rest of the team, who were just 15 meters away from the scene, immediately approached, arrested the accused, and frisked the latter. PO3 Palacio recovered two (2) other clear plastic sachets from the accused’s right pocket. The three sachets were marked “CC-1,” “CC-2” and “CC-3” – “CC” representing the initials of the accused, Cipriano Cardenas.[10] He was then brought to Camp Crame, where he was booked and investigated. The plastic sachets recovered from him were transmitted to the PNP Crime Laboratory for analysis upon the request of Police Chief Inspector Ricardo N. Sto. Domingo, Jr. of the DSOD–CIDG.[11] The results of the Initial Laboratory Report dated 07 January 2003[12] showed that the white crystalline substance contained in the three (3) heat-sealed plastic sachets tested positive for methylamphetamine hydrochloride, or shabu, with a total weight of 0.05 gram.[13]

On 07 January 2003, an Information for violation of Section 5, Article II of R.A. 9165, was filed against the accused.[14] The case was raffled to the Regional Trial Court (RTC), National Judicial Capital Region of Quezon City, Branch 103 and docketed as Criminal Case No. Q-03-114312.

The Accused’s Version of the Facts

The accused had a different version of the facts surrounding his arrest. He claimed that around 3:00 p.m. of 06 January 2003, while he was walking home, four persons handcuffed him and forced him to board a vehicle.[15] He was taken to the CIDG office at Camp Crame, where he was informed that he was being arrested for selling shabu. While inside the investigation room, one of the men who arrested him gave the investigator a ₱100 bill. He claimed to have not seen the alleged shabu at the time of his arrest or even during the CIDG investigation or during the inquest at the public prosecutor’s office.[16]

The Ruling of the Trial Court

A full-blown trial was held by the RTC, before which were presented PO3 Palacio and PO3 Enteria as witnesses for the prosecution. For the defense, only the accused testified in his defense. On 03 January 2007, the RTC promulgated a Decision[17] convicting him of the crime charged. The trial court gave credence to the testimonies and pieces of evidence presented by the prosecution. It ruled that the police operation had followed the normal course of a drug entrapment operation, and that the arresting officers presented as prosecution witnesses were credible based on their candid and honest demeanor. The RTC considered as absurd the allegation of the accused that he had been whimsically arrested by the police officers during the operation. It found as weak and inconceivable his uncorroborated denial of the charge.

The dispositive portion of the RTC Decision reads:

ACCORDINGLY, judgement is hereby rendered finding the accused CIRPIANO CARDENAS y GOFERICA GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of violation of Section 5 of R.A. 9165 (drug pushing) as charged and he is hereby sentenced to a jail term of LIFE IMPRISONMENT and to pay a fine of P500,000.00.

The 3 sachets of shabu involved in this case are ordered transmitted to the PDEA thru the DDB for proper care and disposition as required by R.A. 9165.

SO ORDERED.

The Ruling of the Court of Appeals

The accused appealed his conviction to the CA, which docketed the case as CA-G.R. CR-H.C. No. 2634. On 19 February 2009, the appellate court, through its Second Division, promulgated a Decision[18] affirming the trial court's conviction of the accused. It ruled that the prosecution was able to establish the necessary elements to prove the illegal sale of drugs under Section 5, Article II of R.A. 9165. It also found that the prosecution witnesses were credible when they testified on the custody and identity of the drugs confiscated from the accused. Thus, it affirmed in toto the RTC's Decision, which it found to be supported by the facts and law. The accused filed a Motion for Reconsideration, but it was denied by the appellate court for lack of merit.

The Issues

The accused elevated his appeal to this Court raising this lone issue:

THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS COMMITTED A REVERSIBLE ERROR IN CONVICTING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT DESPITE NON-COMPLIANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PROPER CUSTODY OF SEIZED DANGEROUS DRUGS UNDER R.A. NO. 9165.[19]

The defense alleges that the arresting officers did not follow the required procedure for the handling of seized drugs in a buy-bust operation as stated in Section 21 of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of R.A. 9165.[20] It points out that there is a dearth of evidence to prove that the plastic sachets recovered from the accused were marked at the crime scene in his presence immediately upon confiscation thereof.[21] Thus, the defense argues that due to the arresting officers' noncompliance with the correct procedure, the accused is entitled to an acquittal.[22]

The Ruling of the Court

We DENY the appeal of the accused for lack of merit and accordingly affirm the assailed Decision of the CA.

Under Section 5 of R.A. 9165, the elements that must be proven for the successful prosecution of the illegal sale of shabu are as follows: (1) the identity of the buyer and the seller, the object of the sale, and the consideration; and (2) the delivery of the thing sold and its payment.[23] The State has the burden of proving these elements and is obliged to present the corpus delicti in court to support a finding of guilt beyond reasonable doubt.[24]

In the instant case, the defense does not raise any issue with regard the sale and delivery of the illegal drugs for which the accused was arrested. The point of contention pertains to the noncompliance by the arresting officers with Section 21, Article II of the IRR implementing R.A. 9165 regarding the chain of custody of seized drugs. This is an important matter because, if proven, substantial gaps in the chain of custody of the seized drugs would cast serious doubts on the authenticity of the evidence presented in court and entitle the accused to an acquittal.

In *People v. Salonga*,[25] we held that it is essential for the prosecution to prove that the prohibited drug confiscated or recovered from the suspect is the very same substance offered in court as exhibit. Its identity must be established with unwavering exactitude for it to lead to a finding of guilt. Thus, drug enforcement agents and police officers involved in a buy-bust operation are required by R.A. 9165 and its implementing rules to mark all seized evidence at the buy-bust scene. Section 21 (a), Article II of the IRR, states:

SECTION 21. Custody and Disposition of Confiscated, Seized and/or Surrendered Dangerous Drugs, Plant Sources of Dangerous Drugs, Controlled Precursors and Essential Chemicals, Instruments/Paraphernalia and/or Laboratory Equipment.

(a) The apprehending officer/team having initial custody and control of the drugs shall, immediately after seizure and confiscation, physically inventory and photograph the same in the presence of the accused or the person/s from whom such items were confiscated and/or seized, or his/her representative or counsel, a representative from the media and the Department of Justice (DOJ), and any elected public official who shall

be required to sign the copies of the inventory and be given a copy thereof: Provided, that the physical inventory and photograph shall be conducted at the place where the search warrant is served; or at the nearest police station or at the nearest office of the apprehending officer/team, whichever is practicable, in case of warrantless seizures; Provided, further, that non-compliance with these requirements under justifiable grounds, as long as the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items are properly preserved by the apprehending officer/team, shall not render void and invalid such seizures of and custody over said items;

The defense wants to impress upon this Court that the arresting officers did not conduct a physical inventory of the items seized and failed to photograph them in the presence of the accused and of other personalities specified by Section 21 (a), Article II of the IRR of R.A. 9165.[26] It argues that this lapse on the part of the police officers involved in the buy-bust operation raise uncertainty and doubts as to the identity and integrity of the articles seized from the accused – whether they were the same items presented at the trial court that convicted him. Based on this noncompliance by the arresting officers, the defense prays for the acquittal of the accused.

We are not persuaded by these arguments.

The chain of custody is defined in Section 1(b) of Dangerous Drugs Board Regulation No. 1, Series of 2002, which implements R.A. No. 9165:

b. “Chain of Custody” means the duly recorded authorized movements and custody of seized drugs or controlled chemicals or plant sources of dangerous drugs or laboratory equipment of each stage, from the time of seizure/confiscation to receipt in the forensic laboratory to safekeeping to presentation in court for destruction. Such record of movements and custody of seized item shall include the identity and signature of the person who held temporary custody of the seized item, the date and time when such transfer of custody were made in the course of safekeeping and used in court as evidence, and the final disposition.

To protect the civil liberties of the innocent, the rule ensures that the prosecution’s evidence meets the stringent standard of proof beyond reasonable doubt. We have held, however that substantial compliance with the procedural aspect of the chain of custody rule does not necessarily render the seized drug items inadmissible. In *People v. Ara*,[27] we ruled that R.A. 9165 and its IRR do not require strict compliance with the chain of custody rule:

As recently highlighted in *People v. Cortez* and *People v. Lazaro, Jr.*, RA 9165 and its subsequent Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) do not require strict compliance as to the chain of custody rule. The arrest of an accused will not be invalidated and the items seized from him rendered inadmissible on the sole ground of non-compliance with Sec. 21, Article II of RA 9165. We have emphasized that what is essential is “the preservation of the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items, as the same would be utilized in the determination of the guilt or innocence of the accused.”

Briefly stated, non-compliance with the procedural requirements under RA 9165 and its IRR relative to the custody, photographing, and drug-testing of the apprehended persons, is not a serious flaw that can render void the seizures and custody of drugs in a buy-bust operation. (Emphasis supplied.)

In the instant case, we find that the chain of custody of the seized prohibited drugs was not broken. The testimony of PO3 Palacio shows that he was the one who recovered from the accused the three plastic sachets of shabu, together with the marked money. He also testified that he was the one who personally brought the request for examination to the PNP Crime Laboratory and had the plastic sachets examined there. During the trial of the case, he positively identified the plastic sachets that he had recovered from the accused and had marked “CC-1,” “CC-2” and “CC-3.” The pertinent portions of the testimony of PO3 Palacio are as follows:

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

And after you recovered the buy-bust money and these three plastic sachets of shabu, what did you do with the accused?

WITNESS:

A.

We brought them to the office.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

What happened to (sic) the office?

WITNESS:

A.

He was investigated.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

How about the three plastic sachets, what did you do with these three plastic sachets.

WITNESS:

A.

We have examined it at the Crime Laboratory.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

How does (sic) it brought to the Crime Laboratory?

WITNESS:

A.

We asked a request from our investigator.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

Is this the same request for laboratory examination that you are referring to?

WITNESS:

A.

Yes sir.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

Who brought this request to the Crime Laboratory for examination?

WITNESS:

A.

I sir.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

Where does it show the delivery?

WITNESS:

A.

Here your honor.

(Witness pointing in open court to the document the request for laboratory examination the date when it was delivered.)

xxx xxx xxx

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

xxx xxx xxx

May we request that the said documents be marked as Exhibit F and if the said plastic sachet would be shown to you, how will you be able to identify the same?

WITNESS:

A.

I can identify it because it has a marking sir CC-1, CC-2, and CC-3 your Honor.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

You mean to say to this Honorable Court that the three plastic sachets has (sic) a marking CC-1, CC-2, and CC-3?

WITNESS:

A.

Yes your Honor.

FIS. JURADO:

Q.

What was (sic) CC stands for?

WITNESS:

The name of our suspect Cipriano Cardenas your Honor.[28]

PO3 Rene Enteria, who had acted as the poseur-buyer in the buy-bust operation, corroborated the testimony of PO3 Palacio and indicated that the latter was in custody of the seized drugs from the time the accused was arrested until these were sent to the crime laboratory for chemical analysis. We quote the relevant portions of PO3 Enteria's testimony from the records:

FIS. ARAULA:

After you said a while ago that you made a pre-arranged signal, what happened then after that?

WITNESS:

PO3 Palacio approached us and arrested the subject sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

When PO3 Palacio arrested the accused, where was (sic) you?

WITNESS:

I was behind them sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

Where is the buy bust money when Palacio arrested the accused?

WITNESS:

It was recovered to (sic) Ope sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

After arresting the accused, what happened then?

WITNESS:

We returned to the police station sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

What happened to the police station?

WITNESS:

The suspect was investigated sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

Who was in possession of that transparent plastic sachet when you were going to the police station?

WITNESS:

I was the one sir.

xxx xxx xxx

FIS. ARAULA:

If that transparent plastic sachet be shown to you, can you identify that?

WITNESS:

Yes sir.

FIS ARAULA:

Showing to you this transparent plastic sachet, what can you say about this?

WITNESS:

This is the one that I purchased sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

It appears that there are three (3) transparent plastic sachets in this case, in fact this is the one that you purchased, how about these two (2) other transparent plastic sachets, where did it came (sic) from?

WITNESS:

It was recovered by Palacio after the arrest of the suspect sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

Why did you say that this is the transparent plastic sachet containing shabu that you purchased?

WITNESS:

Because I remember the size sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

That is the only reason, due to the size of the transparent plastic sachet?

WITNESS:

I also has (sic) initial in the plastic sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

What is the initial?

WITNESS:

Palacio was the one who made the marking sir.

xxx xxx xxx

FIS. ARAULA:

How about the evidence that you confiscated in relation to this Section 5, R.A. 9165 against the accused, where was that when there was an investigation?

WITNESS:

It was brought to the Crime Laboratory for examination sir.[29]

CROSS EXAMINATION:

ATTY. CABAROS:

Who actually recovered the shabu from the accused?

WITNESS:

Palacio sir.

xxx xxx xxx

COURT:

Why is it that it could (sic) seem that Palacio was the one who marked the money and he marked also all the three (3) plastic sachets? You never mark with your initial the buy bust money and you never mark with your initial that particular plastic sachet you said that was given to you by the accused, how come that it was always Palacio (who) made the marking and you as poseur buyer did not mark the items?

WITNESS:

Because when we made (the) marking, we make only one marking, your Honor.[30]

REDIRECT EXAMINATION:

FIS. ARAULA:

When this Palacio placed this mark, all the evidences that was confiscated from the accused, where were you?

WITNESS:

I was near Palacio sir.

FIS. ARAULA:

So you noticed that Palacio placed his markings to the evidences?

WITNESS:

Yes sir.[31] (Emphasis supplied.)

From these testimonies of the police officers, the prosecution established that they had custody of the drugs seized from the accused from the moment he was arrested, during the time he was transported to the CIDG office in Camp Crame, and up to the time the drugs were submitted to the crime laboratory for examination. The said police officers also identified the seized drugs with certainty when these were presented in court. With regard to the handling of the seized drugs, there are no conflicting testimonies or glaring inconsistencies that would cast doubt on the integrity thereof as evidence presented and scrutinized in court. To the unprejudiced mind, the testimonies show without a doubt that the evidence seized from the accused at the time of the buy-bust operation was the same one tested, introduced, and testified to in court. In short, there is no question as to the integrity of the evidence.

Although we find that the police officers did not strictly comply with the requirements of Section 21, Article II of the IRR implementing R.A. 9165, the noncompliance did not affect the evidentiary weight of the drugs seized from the accused, because the chain of custody of the evidence was shown to be unbroken under the circumstances of the case. We held thus in *Zalameda v. People of the Philippines*[32]:

Jurisprudence teems with pronouncements that failure to strictly comply with Section 21(1), Article II of R.A. No. 9165 does not necessarily render an accused's arrest illegal or the items seized or confiscated from him inadmissible. What is of utmost importance is the preservation of the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items, as these would be utilized in the determination of the guilt or innocence of the accused. In the

present case, we see substantial compliance by the police with the required procedure on the custody and control of the confiscated items, thus showing that the integrity of the seized evidence was not compromised. We refer particularly to the succession of events established by evidence, to the overall handling of the seized items by specified individuals, to the test results obtained, under a situation where no objection to admissibility was ever raised by the defense. All these, to the unprejudiced mind, show that the evidence seized were the same evidence tested and subsequently identified and testified to in court. In *People v. Del Monte*, we explained:

We would like to add that non-compliance with Section 21 of said law, particularly the making of the inventory and the photographing of the drugs confiscated and/or seized, will not render the drugs inadmissible in evidence. Under Section 3 of Rule 128 of the Rules of Court, evidence is admissible when it is relevant to the issue and is not excluded by the law or these rules. For evidence to be inadmissible, there should be a law or rule which forbids its reception. If there is no such law or rule, the evidence must be admitted subject only to the evidentiary weight that will accorded it by the courts. x x x

We do not find any provision or statement in said law or in any rule that will bring about the non-admissibility of the confiscated and/or seized drugs due to non-compliance with Section 21 of Republic Act No. 9165. The issue therefore, if there is non-compliance with said section, is not of admissibility, but of weight – evidentiary merit or probative value – to be given the evidence. The weight to be given by the courts on said evidence depends on the circumstances obtaining in each case. (Emphasis supplied.)

On the other hand, the accused alleges that he did not commit the crime he was charged with and claims to have not seen the evidence presented by the prosecution. It was established that he sold the seized drugs to PO3 Enteria during the buy-bust operation, and that the sachets were found in his possession. These facts establish the elements of Section 5, R.A. 9165. The only issue the appellant raises before us is the noncompliance by the police officer with the correct procedure for the handling of the evidence seized from him. We have no reason to doubt the police officers who gave detailed accounts of what they did during the buy-bust operation. Their testimonies have adequately established the unbroken chain of custody of the seized drugs and have led us to affirm the conviction of the accused.

The credibility of witnesses is a matter best examined by, and left to, the trial courts. The time-tested doctrine is that the matter of assigning values to declarations on the witness stand is best and most competently performed by the trial judge. Unlike appellate magistrates, it is the judge who can weigh such testimonies in light of the witnesses' demeanor and manner of testifying, and who is in a unique position to discern between truth and falsehood. Thus, appellate courts will not disturb the credence, or lack of it, accorded by the trial court to the testimonies of witnesses. This is especially true when the trial court's findings have been affirmed by the appellate court. For them the said findings are considered generally conclusive and binding upon this Court, [33] unless it be manifestly shown that the trial court had overlooked or arbitrarily disregarded facts and circumstances of significance.[34] Thus, we affirm the assailed Decision of the appellate court and uphold the conviction of the accused.

WHEREFORE, the appeal is DENIED. The CA Decision in CA-G.R. CR-H.C. No. 2634, *People of the Philippines v. Cipriano Cardenas y Gofrerica* dated 19 February 2009, is AFFIRMED in all respects.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio, (Chairperson), Brion, Perez, and Reyes, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 2-12. The Decision dated 19 February 2009 of the CA Second Division was penned by Associate

Justice Ramon M. Bato, Jr. and concurred in by Associate Justice Portia Alino-Hormachuelos and former CA (now Supreme Court) Associate Justice Jose Catral Mendoza.

[2] RTC Records, pp. 144-146. The Decision dated 03 January 2007 in Criminal Case No. Q-03-114312 was penned by Presiding Judge Jaime N. Salazar, Jr.

[3] RTC Records, p. 1.

[4] Id. at 17.

[5] Id. at 144.

[6] TSN, 14 March 2003, p. 12.

[7] Id. at 11.

[8] RTC Records, p. 148.

[9] Id.

[10] Id.

[11] Id. at 7.

[12] This initial result was followed by the issuance of an official report by the PNP Crime Laboratory in Camp Crame denominated as Chemistry Report No. D-002-03 dated 07 January 2003, which states that the qualitative examination yielded positive for methylamphetamine hydrochloride, a dangerous drug. This was marked as Exhibit “G” for the prosecution; RTC Records, p. 10.

[13] The three plastic sachets were individually marked and weighed as follows: “CC-1” – 0.01 gram; “CC-2” – 0.01 gram and “CC-3” – 0.03 gram. RTC Records, pp. 9-10.

[14] Id. at 1.

[15] TSN, 26 April 2005, p. 3.

[16] TSN, 30 May 2005, pp. 4-6.

[17] Supra note 2.

[18] Supra note 1.

[19] Rollo, p. 33.

[20] Id. at 34.

[21] Id. at 36.

[22] Id. at 41.

[23] *People v. Ara*, G.R. No. 185011, 23 December 2009, 609 SCRA 304.

[24] *People v. Coreche*, G.R. No. 182528, 14 August 2009, 596 SCRA 350.

[25] G.R. No. 186390, 02 October 2009, 602 SCRA 783.

[26] Rollo, pp. 35-36.

[27] Supra note 23.

[28] TSN, 14 March 2003, pp. 14-18.

[29] TSN, 29 September 2004, pp. 9-10.

[30] Id. at 12-13.

[31] TSN, 29 September 2004, p. 17.

[32] G.R. No. 183656, 04 September 2009, 598 SCRA 537.

[33] *People v. Lazaro, Jr.*, G.R. No. 186418, 16 October 2009, 604 SCRA 250.

[34] *People v. Daria, Jr.*, G.R. No. 186138, 11 September 2009, 599 SCRA 688.

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