

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. RICARDO MONDEJAR Y BOCARILI, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. No. 193185. October 12, 2011

Ponente: SERENO, J.

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SERENO, J.:

On 29 August 2006, an Information was filed against Ricardo Mondejar (accused-appellant) for violation of Section 5, Article II of Republic Act (R.A.) No. 9165 in the following manner:

That on or about August 27, 2006, in the City of Manila, Philippines, the said accused, not having been authorized by law to sell, trade, deliver or give away to another any dangerous drug, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and knowingly sell to a poseur-buyer ZERO POINT ZERO ONE ONE (0.011) GRAM of white crystalline substance placed in one (1) heat sealed transparent plastic sachet marked as "RMB" containing methylamphetamine hydrochloride known as "SHABU", a dangerous drug.

CONTRARY TO LAW.

The case was docketed as Criminal Case No. 06-246328 on 12 October 2006 and raffled to Branch 35 of the Regional Trial Court, Manila.

On 12 October 2006, accused-appellant pleaded not guilty to the offense charged upon arraignment in Filipino.

During trial, the prosecution presented the testimonies of Senior Police Officer 2 (SPO2) Federico Casuple and PO2 Elymar Garcia, while the defense presented accused-appellant himself as its sole witness.

The first prosecution witness was SPO2 Casuple, a police officer assigned at the Station Anti-Illegal Drug Special Operation Task Unit (SAID-SOTU), Police Station 2 of the Manila Police District. He testified that a female informant went to their office on 26 August 2006 to report that a certain person known by the alias "Danny" was selling illegal drugs at the Manila International Container Port ("MICP") in Tondo, Manila.[1] In view thereof, the police officers prepared the corresponding Pre-Operation and Coordination Report.[2] The police undertook surveillance at the site that night but they did not see accused-appellant. This was the only surveillance they conducted on the matter.[3] The informant explained that accused-appellant sold drugs only in the daytime.[4]

Accordingly, the police instructed the informant to report back to their office the next day should accused-appellant be seen around the area. The next day or on 27 August 2006, at around 1 p.m., the informant returned to their office to inform the police that accused-appellant was again selling drugs in the area.[5] The Chief of the SAID designated SPO2 Casuple as the poseur-buyer and gave him P100[6] which the latter marked "PS2" at the upper left corner.[7] SPO2 Casuple then went to the site together with the informant, PO2 Roman Jimenez, and PO2 Garcia. SPO2 Casuple and the informant went on foot to look for accused-appellant. They were informed that he had already gone home. SPO2 Casuple relayed this information to his fellow police officers.

Thereafter, the informant reported that accused-appellant could be found at his home in Purok 2, Isla Puting Bato. As the area was just beside MICP, they decided to proceed to the said address.[8] Upon reaching the place, the

informant immediately recognized and approached accused-appellant, telling the latter that SPO2 Casuple wanted to buy "shabu" (methylamphetamine hydrochloride). Accused-appellant asked how much SPO2 Casuple would buy, and the latter replied, "piso" or P100 worth.

SPO2 Casuple claimed that accused-appellant did not suspect anything and demanded immediate payment. SPO2 Casuple gave the money and immediately pressed the "call" key of his cellphone, as this was the pre-arranged signal to his fellow officers that the buy-bust operation had been consummated.[9] SPO2 Casuple then introduced himself as a police officer. Soon his fellow officers arrived and they all brought accused-appellant to the police station.[10] At the police station, SPO2 Casuple personally marked the confiscated item with the initials "RMB," which stands for accused-appellant's name (Ricardo Mondejar y Bocarili) and then handed it to the investigator.

SPO2 Casuple later testified that the investigator had requested a laboratory examination[11] of the item which was then brought to the Crime Laboratory.[12] SPO2 Casuple stated that after receiving the Chemistry Report[13] on the item seized, he, together with PO2 Garcia, executed an "Affidavit of Apprehension/Poseur-Buyer." [14]

On cross-examination, SPO2 Casuple admitted that they had not coordinated with the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) regarding the buy-bust operation on 27 August 2006, as the box beside the word "Buy-Bust" was not checked in the Pre-Operation and Coordination Report.[15] SPO2 Casuple confirmed that an inventory of seized items was prepared, but that he was unaware of whether a photograph of the plastic sachet confiscated from accused-appellant had been taken, because he "just turned over the plastic sachet to the investigator and he knows what to do." [16] SPO2 Casuple also confirmed that he was aware of Section 21 of R.A. No. 9165, having been briefed that it refers to "planting of evidence against the accused." [17]

PO2 Garcia, who was a "perimeter back up," testified that around 2:30 or 2:50 in the afternoon of 27 August 2006, they were deployed at the MICP compound at Parola, Tondo, Manila by the Chief of the SAID, Senior Police Inspector (SPI) Arnulfo Ibanez for an anti-illegal drug operation.[18] PO2 Garcia testified that he stayed inside the vehicle while SPO2 Casuple and the informant went around to look for accused-appellant. When SPO2 Casuple and the informant proceeded to Isla Puting Bato and entered an alley, PO2 Garcia stayed out of the street until he received the pre-arranged signal.[19] Upon receiving the signal, he approached SPO2 Casuple and found him already accosting accused-appellant.[20]

PO2 Garcia provided security for the arresting officer and brought accused-appellant to the SAID office. At the police station, PO2 Garcia witnessed SPO2 Casuple recover from accused-appellant the buy-bust money and "one small transparent plastic sachet containing white crystalline substance," which SPO2 Casuple marked with the letters "RMB." [21] Later on cross-examination, PO2 Garcia confirmed that he did not have any personal knowledge of the ultimate source of the plastic sachet.[22]

The prosecution presented an accomplished Pre-Operation Report/Coordination Sheet[23] dated 26 August 2006 showing that the SAID

Chief, SPI Arnulfo Ibanez, had created a team consisting of six (6) police officers and three (3) confidential informants "to conduct police operation against @ Maribel, Charing, Gina, Danny, Lani involved in illegal drug activities in AOR." Specifically, the team was to undertake surveillance and casing to run from "1830H 26 Aug 06 to 1830H 27 Aug 06" in the area of operation specified as "Tindalo, Jas, Parola, Bambang, Del Pan Sts. Tondo, PS2 AOR." A facsimile copy of the Certificate of Coordination issued by the PDEA dated 26 August 2006 was also presented to show the coordination between PDEA and the police prior to the conduct of the buy bust.[24] The prosecution also offered as evidence the Request for Laboratory Examination[25] of the seized item marked "RMB" dated 27 August 2006 issued by Station Commander Police Superintendent Ricardo Layug, Jr. The written request was shown to have been delivered by PO2 Garcia to "SPI Reyes" of the Philippine National Police

(PNP) Crime Laboratory. PNP Crime Laboratory Chemistry Report No. D-1007-06,[26] which confirmed that the plastic sachet delivered to it had tested positive for methylamphetamine hydrochloride or "shabu", was likewise offered in evidence. It showed that the examination had been made by "Elisa G. Reyes, Police Senior Inspector, Forensic Chemical Officer," approved by the Chief of the Chemical Section of the Crime Laboratory, noted by the Police Chief Inspector, and sworn to before an administering officer.

The defense did not present any documentary evidence.

The defense presented the accused-appellant as lone witness. In his testimony, accused-appellant claimed that on 27 August 2006, at about 2:30 p.m., he was alone in Purok 2, walking along the alley which he estimated to be about three to four meters wide.[27] He was leaving home with a basin about three feet in circumference[28] and full of the corn he was going to sell.[29] When he turned back, he saw that three police officers behind him were chasing someone.[30] He knew they were police officers, because they were wearing blue t-shirts (as opposed to polo shirts) with collars and name tags stating their surnames.[31] The unknown person being chased bumped accused-appellant, causing the latter to drop the basin and accidentally spill the corn. The police tripped on the basin and had to stop the chase.[32] Before they resumed the chase, SPO2 Casuple uttered invectives[33] against accused-appellant, threatening to get back at the latter, should they fail to catch the person they were chasing.[34] Accused-appellant claimed that the police officers were unable to overtake the person they were chasing. So they went back, picked him up, and showed him a plastic sachet while saying, "Eto gagawin kong ebidensya laban sa iyo." [35]

Accused-appellant stated that apart from the failure of the police officers to catch the person they were after when they tripped on his basin of corn, he knew of no other reason why SPO2 Casuple would falsely testify against him. He claimed he did not file any countercharge against SPO2 Casuple, because he was unfamiliar with the law but, given the chance, he would do so.[36]

On 9 April 2008, the trial court issued its Decision,[37] the dispositive portion of which reads in part:

Wherefore, finding accused Ricardo Mondejar y Bocarili @ "Danny" GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of the offense charged, he is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment; to pay a fine of Five Hundred Thousand (P500,000.00) Pesos; and the cost of suit.

On 22 May 2008, accused-appellant, through counsel Public Attorney's Office, filed a Notice of Appeal with the Court of Appeals (CA). In his Appellant's Brief, accused-appellant argued that the presumption of regularity in the performance of duty cannot, by itself, affect the constitutional presumption of innocence of the accused.[38] Further, credence is given to police officers as prosecution witnesses unless there is evidence suggesting ill motives on their part or a deviation from the regular performance of their duties.[39] Accused-appellant thereafter pointed out that the confiscated plastic sachet was not immediately marked at the place where it was allegedly seized; nor were photographs taken or inventories made in the presence of any elected public official, media, or representative from the Department of Justice, in contravention of Section 21 (1) of R.A. No. 9165.

On 18 December 2009, the CA issued its Decision,[40] the dispositive portion of which reads:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant appeal is denied for lack of merit, and accordingly, the assailed April 9, 2008 Decision of the trial court convicting Ricardo Bocarili Mondejar of violation of Section 5, Article II of R.A. No. 9165, including the penalties imposed against him, is hereby AFFIRMED IN TOTO.

SO ORDERED.

In its Decision, the CA held:

Under the circumstances, We see no break in trail of confiscation, marking, identification, custody, control,

examination and disposition of the prohibited drugs, in the same manner that We find no confusion or uncertainty over the fact that the 0.011 gram of shabu that was marked at the police station, then tested and examined positive for shabu at the PNP Crime Laboratory, and eventually adduced in evidence in court against Mondejar is the same shabu that was seized from Mondejar during the entrapment operation. (Decision, pp. 10-11)[41]

The CA held that accused-appellant's defense that he had merely been framed up failed to persuade. It cannot believe that the police would be so "brazenly unreasonable" as to subject accused-appellant to a false charge only because they failed to catch the person they intended to arrest when they tripped on his basin of corn.[42]

Accused-appellant comes to this Court seeking a reversal of the CA Decision sustaining the trial court's finding that he is guilty beyond reasonable doubt of violation of Section 5 of R.A. No. 9165.

We rule to affirm the appealed Decision.

It has been held that in a prosecution for violation of the Dangerous Drugs Law, a case becomes a contest of credibility of witnesses and their testimonies.[43] Since it was the trial court that had the opportunity to observe the witnesses' demeanor and deportment while testifying, the rule is that the trial court's assessment of their credibility is entitled to great respect,[44] and even finality, unless facts of weight and substance bearing on the elements of the crime have been overlooked, misapprehended or misapplied.[45]

In arriving at its Decision, the trial court reasoned:

The testimony of the accused is replete with material inconsistencies and incredible statements which render it unworthy of belief. Thus, at one point, he claims that when he was picked up by the police a plastic sachet was shown to him by PO2 Capsule and the latter told him it will be used as evidence against him. (TSN, October 9, 2007, p. 4). Later, however, he testified that the plastic sachet was shown to him only when he was brought to the City Hall for inquest. (TSN, October 9, 2007, p. 9). Being contradictory of each other, it is indicative of accused's propensity to prevaricate. (Decision, p. 4)

We have gone over the transcripts and note that the trial court was referring to the following portion of accused-appellant's testimony:

Q Now, you said that police officer Casuple showed you a plastic sachet and told you that they are going to use the plastic sachet to file a case against you, did I hear you right?

A That is correct, sir.

Q Where did the plastic sachet come from?

A I do not know, sir, they immediately showed that to me.

Q At the police station before you were brought there were you frisked?

A No, sir, but they mauled me, sir.

Q At the police station, did they frisk you?

A Yes, sir.

Q After the frisking they showed you the plastic sachet?

A Not yet, sir.

Q When was the plastic sachet shown to you

A When they brought me to City Hall, sir.

Q That was on the same day?

A Yes, sir.

Q Why were you brought to the City Hall?

A I was to be presented for inquest, sir. [46]

Accused-appellant initially testified that the plastic sachet was shown to him while he was in an alley in Isla Puting Bato, with the police threatening to use it as evidence against him. On the other hand, in accused-appellant's declaration above, he stated that he had been shown the plastic sachet when he was brought to the City Hall for inquest. On its face, there does not seem to be a real contradiction between the two declarations, considering that accused-appellant has not described either instance as the first time the plastic sachet was shown to him. Moreover, it is not impossible that the sachet was shown to him on more than one occasion.

We nevertheless note that the Court "reads only in cold print the testimony of witnesses which is usually translated from the local dialect into English. In the process of translation, 'not only the fine nuances but a world of meaning apparent to the judge present, watching and listening, may escape the reader of the written translated words.' Necessarily, the appellate court is placed at a disadvantage in this regard. Hence, in the absence of a glaring misapprehension of facts on the part of the trial court, the appellate court places great reliance on its findings of facts." [47] Hence, while accused-appellant was not conclusively shown to have contradicted himself as regards the time when the plastic sachet was shown to him by the police, we have to rely on the perception of the trial court on the matter. At any rate, the court *a quo* cites this as only one of several material inconsistencies and incredible statements made by accused-appellant during the trial.

Accused-appellant argues that the presumption of innocence cannot be overturned by the presumption of regularity in the performance of official duties. This is correct. However, both are mere disputable presumptions, which can be overcome by evidence to the contrary.

In the present case, accused-appellant has not presented any evidence to support his defense of frame-up apart from his uncorroborated testimony. He could have at least presented another witness or some other evidence to corroborate his claim that the accusation against him was a mere fabrication. After all, "frame-up, like alibi, is generally viewed with caution by this Court, because it is easy to contrive and difficult to disprove. Moreover, it is a common and standard line of defense in prosecutions of violations of the Dangerous Drugs Act." [48]

In contrast, the prosecution has adduced testimonial and documentary evidence, which we have reviewed.

It is true that, as pointed out by accused-appellant, the procedure under Section 21(1) of R.A. No. 9165 was not strictly followed by the police. The records show that the plastic sachet seized from accused-appellant was marked at the police station; and that no elected public official, media or representative from the Department of Justice was present during the inventory. Nevertheless,

xxx we have held in several cases that non-compliance with Section 21, Article II of Republic Act No. 9165 is not fatal and will not render an accused's arrest illegal or the items seized/confiscated from him inadmissible. What is of utmost importance 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. In the case at bar, the integrity of the drug seized from appellants was preserved. The chain of custody of the drug subject matter of the instant case was shown not to have been broken. xxx Besides, the integrity of the evidence is presumed to be preserved unless there is a showing of bad faith, ill will, or proof that the evidence has been tampered with. Appellants in this case bear the burden of showing that the evidence was tampered or meddled with to

overcome a presumption that there was regularity in the handling of exhibits by public officers, and that the latter properly discharged their duties. Appellants failed to produce convincing proof that the evidence submitted by the prosecution had been tampered with. xxx As earlier discussed, the only elements necessary to consummate the crime is proof that the illicit transaction took place, coupled with the presentation in court of the dangerous drug seized as evidence. Both were satisfactorily proved in the present case."[49]

Applying the foregoing points to the present case, we note that accused-appellant has not adduced any evidence to show that the integrity of the evidence has been compromised. On the other hand, the seized plastic sachet and marked money were properly presented and identified in court. The prosecution was able to sufficiently prove the chain of custody of the seized item from the time it was obtained from accused-appellant and marked by SPO2 Casuple, until it was delivered by PO2 Garcia to SPI Reyes of the PNP Crime Laboratory who made the laboratory examination thereof and the corresponding Laboratory Report. Earlier, during pre-trial, the parties had dispensed with the testimony of SPI Reyes after stipulating on her position and qualifications and on the results of her examination of the item submitted for testing.[50]

We did observe that the police failed to check the box marked "buy-bust operation" in its Pre-Operation and Coordination Report. However, standing alone, this minor omission does not affect the finding of guilt of accused-appellant. As ruled by the Court in *People v. Sta. Maria*,[51]

xxx [Cursorially] read, the foregoing provision is silent as to the consequences of failure on the part of the law enforcers to transfer drug-related cases to the PDEA, in the same way that the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of Republic Act No. 9165 is also silent on the matter. But by no stretch of imagination could this silence be interpreted as a legislative intent to make an arrest without the participation of PDEA illegal nor evidence obtained pursuant to such an arrest inadmissible.

It is a well-established rule of statutory construction that where great inconvenience will result from a particular construction, or great public interests would be endangered or sacrificed, or great mischief done, such construction is to be avoided, or the court ought to presume that such construction was not intended by the makers of the law, unless required by clear and unequivocal words.

As we see it, Section 86 is explicit only in saying that the PDEA shall be the "lead agency" in the investigations and prosecutions of drug-related cases. Therefore, other law enforcement bodies still possess authority to perform similar functions as the PDEA as long as illegal drugs cases will eventually be transferred to the latter. Additionally, the same provision states that PDEA, serving as the implementing arm of the Dangerous Drugs Board, "shall be responsible for the efficient and effective law enforcement of all the provisions on any dangerous drug and/or controlled precursor and essential chemical as provided in the Act." We find much logic in the Solicitor General's interpretation that it is only appropriate that drugs cases being handled by other law enforcement authorities be transferred or referred to the PDEA as the "lead agency" in the campaign against the menace of dangerous drugs. Section 86 is more of an administrative provision. By having a centralized law enforcement body, i.e., the PDEA, the Dangerous Drugs Board can enhance the efficacy of the law against dangerous drugs. To be sure, Section 86 (a) of the IRR emphasizes this point by providing:

(a) Relationship/Coordination between PDEA and Other Agencies -- The PDEA shall be the lead agency in the enforcement of the Act, while the PNP, the [National Bureau of Investigation (NBI)] and other law enforcement agencies shall continue to conduct anti-drug operations in support of the PDEA Provided, finally, that nothing in this IRR shall deprive the PNP, the NBI, other law enforcement personnel and the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) from effecting lawful arrests and seizures in consonance with the provisions of Section 5, Rule 113 of the Rules of Court. (Underscoring supplied.)

In other words, the fact that the PDEA was not notified of the buy-bust operation, as shown in the Pre-Operation

and Coordination Report, cannot by itself exculpate accused-appellant. In the first place, the police are authorized to effect a warrantless arrest. Second, R.A. No. 9165 does not invalidate a buy-bust operation in which the PDEA is not notified. Third, the PDEA actually had some knowledge of the operation against one who had the alias "Danny" (albeit only for "casing" and "surveillance"), as the Pre-Operation and Coordination Report had been sent to and confirmed by it prior to the buy-bust operation.

In fine, after going over the records of the case and the evidence adduced by the parties, we do not find sufficient basis to reverse the ruling of the Court of Appeals affirming the trial court's conviction of accused-appellant for violation of Section 5 of R.A. No. 9165.

WHEREFORE, the assailed Court of Appeals Decision is AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio, (Chairperson), Brion, Reyes, and Perlas-Bernabe, JJ.[*] concur.

[*] Designated as Acting Member of the Second Division vice Associate Justice Jose P. Perez per Special Order No. 1114 dated October 3, 2011.

[1] TSN, 17 July 2007, p. 4.

[2] Exhibit "G", folder of exhibits, p.5.

[3] TSN, supra at 8.

[4] Id. at 5.

[5] Id. at 6.

[6] Exhibit "F", folder of exhibits, p. 8.

[7] TSN, supra at 7; Exhibit "F-1", folder of exhibits, p. 8.

[8] Id. at 9.

[9] Id. at 11.

[10] Id. at 12.

[11] Exhibit "B", folder of exhibits, p. 37.

[12] Supra at 12.

[13] Exhibit "D", folder of exhibits, p. 38.

[14] Supra note 1 at 13.

[15] Exhibit "G", folder of exhibits, p. 5.

[16] TSN, supra at 20.

[17] Id. at 21.

[18] TSN, 19 July 2007, p. 7.

[19] Id. at 9.

[20] Id.

[21] Id. at 10.

[22] Id. at 13.

[23] Exhibit "G", folder of exhibits, p. 5.

[24] Exhibit "E", folder of exhibits, p. 39.

[25] Exhibit "B", folder of exhibits, p. 37.

[26] Exhibit "D", folder of exhibits, p. 38.

[27] TSN, 9 October 2007, p. 11.

[28] Id. at 13.

[29] Id. at 10.

[30] Id. at 3.

[31] Id. at 14-15.

[32] Supra at 13.

[33] Accused-appellant recalled that the exact words of SPO2 Casuple were "Putang ina mo! Babalikan ka namin pag di namin inabutan ang hinahabol namin"; TSN, supra at 13.

[34] Id. at 14[.]

[35] Id. at 4.

[36] Id. at 5.

[37] The Decision of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 35, Manila in Crim. Case No. 06-246328 was penned by Judge Eugenio Mendinueto.

[38] Citing *People v. Padilla*, G.R. No. 172603, 24 August 2007, 531 SCRA 185 and *Valdez v. People*, G.R. No. 170180, 23 November 2007, 538 SCRA 611.

[39] Citing *People v. de Guzman*, G.R. No. 177569, 28 November 2007, 539 SCRA 306.

[40] The Decision of the Court of Appeals Thirteenth Division in CA G.R. HC No. 03423 was penned by Justice Rosmari Carandang and concurred in by Justices Arturo Tayag and Michael Elbinias; rollo, pp. 2-15.

[41] Rollo, pp. 11-12.

[42] Decision of the Court of Appeals, rollo, p. 13.

[43] *People v. Evangelista*, G.R. No. 175281, 27 September 2007, 534 SCRA 241; *People v. Naquita*, G.R. No. 180511, 28 July 2008, 560 SCRA 430.

[44] *People v. Bato*, G.R. No. 134939, 16 February 2000, 325 SCRA 671; *People v. Juntilla*, G.R. No. 130604, 16 September 1999, 314 SCRA 568.

[45] *People v. Magbanua*, G.R. No. 170137, 27 August 2009, 597 SCRA 287; *People v. Encila*, G.R. No. 182419, 10 February 2009, 578 SCRA 341; *People v. Cabacaba*, G.R. No. 171310, 9 July 2008, 557 SCRA 475.

[46] TSN, *supra* note 27 at 7-9.

[47] *People v. Sacristan*, G.R. No. 74298, 4 June 1993, 223 SCRA 140.

[48] *People v. Eugenio*, 443 Phil. 411 (2003).

[49] *People v. Hernandez*, G.R. No. 184804, 18 June 2009, 589 SCRA 625.

[50] Order of RTC, Branch 35, Manila, dated 12 October 2006, p. 1-2.

[51] G.R. No. 171019, 23 February 2007, 516 SCRA 621.

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