

CONSOLACION P. MARCOS, PETITIONER, VS. PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, GERMAN YAP, ANDRES DUCA, AND OSCAR MIRAVALLS, RESPONDENTS.

G.R. No. 252839. November 10, 2021

Ponente: CARANDANG, J.

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CARANDANG, J.:

Before this Court is a Petition for Review on Certiorari[1] under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court, assailing the Decision[2] dated October 29, 2019 and Resolution[3] dated June 10, 2020 of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-G.R. SP No. 149739. The CA affirmed the conviction of Consolacion P. Marcos (Consolacion) of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the Revised Penal Code (RPC).

Facts of the Case

On January 25, 2008, the Assistant Prosecutor of Quezon City filed an Information for Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC against Consolacion, Leonilo Marcos (Leonilo), Pedro Molera (Molera), and Nilo Santos (Santos) alleging the following:

That sometime in February 1985, in Quezon City, Philippines, the above-named accused, did then and there, willfully, unlawfully and feloniously defraud the following persons, namely: German Yap, Alberto Silva, Jaime Franco Bonifacio Urbano, Annaliza Macariola, Erlinda Moratalla, Cornelio Demapanag, Aurora Bautista, Peregrina Leano, Angelito Cortez, Alipio Dela Rosa, Venerando Infiesto, Alfredo Jagunos, Oscar Miravalles, Edilberto Viray, Johnny Llobrera, Generosa Tañafranca, Jaime Valeros, Edgardo Viray, Amor Cantillo, Wilfredo Gallos, and Andres Duca, in the following manner, to wit: the said accused being then owners and developers, respectively of L&C Marketing and Development Corporation and P.P. Molera Realty, Inc., conspiring, confederating with accused NILO SANTOS, former SSS Appraiser, and mutually helping one another, offered to sell low-cost housing units situated at Ireneville IV Subdivision, Biñan, Laguna, and by means of other deceits of similar import induced and succeeded in inducing said complainants to buy aforesaid units, as in fact the aforesaid complainants gave and delivered to herein accused the amounts of Php5,000 each as reservation fee and Php28,000 each as equity, knowing fully well that said representations were false and fraudulent and were incomplete and with defects and located exactly on the water basin, as in fact complainants have suffered another Php500,000 each as damages caused by the flooding and worst, the unjust foreclosure of their units by SSS, to the damage and prejudice of said offended parties in the amount aforementioned.

CONTRARY TO LAW.[4]

On April 1, 2008, Consolacion pleaded not guilty to the offense charged. Molera and Santos were nowhere to be found and there was no return of the notices sent to them. On the other hand, the trial court dismissed the case against Leonilo on account of his death.[5]

On August 20, 2008, Consolacion moved for the dismissal of the case on the ground of prescription as the

Information states that the crime was committed in 1985 but the complaint was only filed before the Office of the City Prosecutor in 2004. However, the trial court denied the Motion to Dismiss, holding that since the crime was discovered only in 2000, the case was timely filed in 2004.[6]

Thereafter, pretrial and trial ensued.

The prosecution presented three witnesses, namely, private respondents German Yap (Yap), Andres Duca (Duca), and Oscar Miravalles (Miravalles), whose testimonies are summarized as follows:

In 1971, P.P. Molera Realty, Inc. (Molera Realty) developed Ireneville IV Subdivision located in Biñan, Laguna. On January 8, 1985, Molera Realty transferred its rights over Ireneville IV Subdivision to L and C Marketing and Development Corporation (L and C Marketing), owned by Spouses Leonilo and Consolacion.[7]

Sometime in 1985, an agent of L and C Marketing visited private respondents in their office in Muntinlupa City and offered to them house and lots for sale in Ireneville IV Subdivision for a down payment of P5,000.00. Enticed by the low down payment for the house and lots, private respondents visited the office of Ireneville IV Subdivision in San Pedro, Laguna and met personally with Consolacion, the corporate treasurer of L and C Marketing. In the said meeting, Consolacion allegedly guaranteed that their loan with the Social Security System (SSS), which would be used to purchase the house and lots, will be approved automatically because of her connections.[8] Private respondents allegedly signed several documents and paid P5,000.00 each as down payment. Subsequently, Consolacion brought the private respondents to Ireneville IV Subdivision for a "tripping" to personally see the model units therein. According to private respondents, Consolacion brought them to the more developed portion of the subdivision. Consolacion also facilitated the loan application of the private respondents to the SSS, where they were asked to sign several documents.[9]

In June 1985, private respondents moved into their new houses in Ireneville IV Subdivision. However, to their dismay, they experienced severe flooding in July 1985 and October 1986, which damaged their houses and endangered their lives. Private respondents later learned from their neighbors that the area where their houses stand was a water basin intended for agricultural irrigation. When they raised the matter to Consolacion, she merely told them that the flooding is normal because it was rainy season.[10]

In 2000, private respondents learned that as early as 1982, there was already a case against Molera Realty for violation of Presidential Decree (P.D.) No. 957 otherwise known as the "Subdivision and Condominium Buyers' Protective Decree," for the substandard development of Ireneville IV Subdivision. They also found that in 1990, Molera has been convicted of violation of P.D. No. 957.[11] Private respondents averred that they only discovered such fact when, on August 25, 2000, they wrote to the Committee on Good Government in the House of Representatives to complain about the illegal activities of L and C Marketing. The Committee later wrote a request to the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB) to conduct an inspection of Ireneville IV Subdivision. Based on the inspection, the HLURB found that L and C Marketing violated the provisions of P.D. No. 957. This finding prompted the HLURB to send a Notice of Violation dated November 13, 2000, requiring Land C Marketing to rehabilitate and repair the facilities in Ireneville IV Subdivision. L and C Marketing did not comply with the orders of the HLURB.[12]

For her part, the defense presented Consolacion as its sole witness. She disowned any involvement in the sale of the house and lots to private respondents, claiming that it was only her husband who managed their company when he was still alive. She denied her involvement in the alleged non-disclosure of Molera's conviction for violation of P.D. No. 957 even before the rights over Ireneville IV Subdivision were transferred to them. She likewise denied having known or having met any of the private respondents.[13]

In her memorandum, Consolacion questioned the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Trial Court (MeTC) of Quezon City, arguing that the crime was allegedly committed in Laguna and not in Quezon City.[14]

Ruling of the Metropolitan Trial Court

In its Decision[15] dated April 8, 2015, the MeTC of Quezon City, Branch 41, found Consolacion guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC and imposed upon her the penalty of four months imprisonment. The MeTC likewise ordered Consolacion to pay fine amounting to P300,000.00, temperate damages amounting to P200,000.00 for each private respondent, moral damages in the amount of P50,000.00 for each private respondent, and exemplary damages in the amount of P50,000.00 for each private respondent.[16]

The MeTC found that the elements of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC are present in this case. The MeTC found that L and C Marketing is owned and managed by Leonilo and Consolacion. Consolacion enticed the private respondents to purchase the house and lots in Ireneville IV Subdivision considering the low down payment and automatic approval of their housing loan in SSS because of Consolacion's connection therein. Worse, during the tripping, Consolacion brought the private respondents in the better and more developed part of the subdivision different from the place where their actual units were built. The private respondents only discovered the defects and the flooding in the subdivision when they moved in.[17] According to the MeTC, these circumstances show that Consolacion committed fraud, deceit, and concealment of material matters.[18]

The MeTC did not give credence to Consolacion's denial of the real status of the subdivision and the fact that it is involved in a case for violation of P.D. No. 957. The MeTC considered this non-disclosure as fraudulent concealment.[19] The MeTC stated that the suppression of a material fact that a party is bound, in good faith, to disclose is equivalent to fraudulent misrepresentation.[20]

The MeTC likewise ruled that it has jurisdiction to take cognizance of the case because the evidence shows that private respondents went to the SSS building in Quezon City for their loan application. Hence, an essential ingredient of the crime of Other Deceits transpired in Quezon City.[21]

Aggrieved, Consolacion appealed the case to the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Quezon City, Branch 224.

Ruling of the Regional Trial Court

On February 24, 2016, the RTC rendered its Decision,[22] affirming with modification the conviction of Consolacion. The RTC deleted the award of moral damages but retained the other monetary awards.[23]

The RTC discussed that the case has not yet prescribed at the time of its filing in the Office of the City Prosecutor in 2004. The running of the prescriptive period started only from the time the private respondents discovered the crime. Here, the RTC held that private respondents discovered the previous case for violation of P.D. No. 957 involving Ireneville IV Subdivision only when they sought assistance from the Committee of Good Government of the House of Representatives, which in turn requested HLURB to conduct inspection of the subdivision. Based on the inspection, HLURB issued a Notice of Violation dated November 13, 2000 against L and C Marketing. Since the prescriptive period for the crime of Other Deceits is five years reckoned from the year 2000, the filing of the case in 2004 was timely.[24]

The RTC likewise agreed with the MeTC that all the elements of the crime were present in this case. For the RTC, fraud was present when the inducement was made. The RTC held that Consolacion's act of bringing private respondents to the better part of the subdivision but turning over to them houses situated in the catch basin is

fraudulent. The RTC stressed that the fraud committed by Consolacion did not end there because despite the Notice of Violation issued by the HLURB, Consolacion still failed to deliver habitable housing units to private respondents.[25]

The RTC also held that the positive identification by the private respondents that it was Consolacion herself who talked to them and convinced them to buy the house and lots from L and C Marketing is more credible than the bare denial of Consolacion. The RTC reiterated that Consolacion's mere denial of the crime, especially since it is unsubstantiated, cannot be given weight.[26]

However, the RTC deleted the award of moral damages for failure to prove that private respondents are entitled to the same.[27]

Consolacion moved for reconsideration, however, her motion was denied in a Resolution dated June 30, 2016. Thereafter, Consolacion filed a petition for review to the CA.

Ruling of the Court of Appeals

In its Decision[28] dated October 29, 2019, the CA affirmed the Decision of the RTC. The CA agreed that the MeTC of Quezon City correctly took cognizance of the case. The CA held that since the crime of Other Deceits is a continuing offense and private respondents were also defrauded when they visited the SSS office in Quezon City to apply for a loan, then one of the essential ingredients of the crime occurred in Quezon City.[29]

The CA likewise concurred with the finding of the trial courts that all the elements of Other Deceits are present in this case. The concealment of Consolacion of the fact that Ireneville IV Subdivision was the subject of a previous case involving violations of the provisions of P.D. No. 957 is fraudulent. The CA stated that the seller's failure to disclose the real condition of an object of sale constitutes fraudulent concealment.[30] According to the CA, private respondents parted with their money because they relied on the fraudulent misrepresentation and concealment of Consolacion.[31]

Lastly, the CA held that at the time of the filing of the complaint to the Prosecutor's Office in 2004, the crime has not yet prescribed. The running of the five-year prescriptive period commenced only at the time of the private respondents' discovery that Consolacion defrauded them. This discovery was made when they found out about the previous case against Molera Realty for violation of P.D. No. 957 and the substandard development of the subdivision in 2010.[32]

Consolacion filed a motion for reconsideration. However, this was denied by the CA in a Resolution[33] dated June 10, 2020.

Insisting on her innocence, Consolacion filed this Petition for Review on Certiorari,[34] questioning the jurisdiction of the MeTC of Quezon City over the case. Consolacion likewise reiterated that the crime has long prescribed and that the elements of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC are not duly proven by the prosecution in this case.[35]

The People of the Philippines, through the Office of the Solicitor General, filed its Comment,[36] agreeing with the trial courts and the CA that the MeTC of Quezon City has jurisdiction to take cognizance of the case, that the crime has not yet prescribed when the complaint was filed to the Office of the City Prosecutor, and that all the elements of the crime of Other Deceits have been duly proven by the prosecution.[37]

Private respondents likewise filed their Comment,[38] reiterating the findings of the trial courts and the CA.

Issue

The issue in this case is whether Consolacion is guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC.

Ruling of the Court

The petition is meritorious.

Before delving into the substantive aspect of this case, the Court shall first deal with procedural matters.

"The determination of the guilt of an accused hinges on how a court appreciates evidentiary matters in relation to the requisites of an offense. Determination of guilt is, thus, a fundamentally factual issue." [39] The Court is not a trier of facts. Consolacion's Rule 45 petition should therefore only raise questions of law and not of facts. However, in exceptional circumstances, "such as when the trial court overlooked material and relevant matters, the Court will recalibrate and evaluate factual findings of the trial courts." [40]

The elements of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC are as follows: "(a) false pretense, fraudulent act, or pretense other than those in the preceding articles; (b) such false pretense, fraudulent act, or pretense must be made or executed prior to or simultaneously with the commission of the fraud; and (c) as a result, the offended party suffered damage or prejudice. It is essential that such false statement or fraudulent representation constitutes the very cause or the only motive for the complainants to part with [their] money. [Article 318] includes any kind of conceivable deceit other than those enumerated in Articles 315 to 317 of the RPC. It is intended as the catchall provision for that purpose with its broad scope and intendment." [41]

People of the Philippines v. Balasa [42] defined fraud as:

Fraud, in its general sense, is deemed to comprise anything calculated to deceive, including all acts, omissions, and concealment involving a breach of legal or equitable duty, trust, or confidence justly reposed, resulting in damage to another, or by which an undue and unconscientious advantage is taken of another. It is a generic term embracing all multifarious means which human ingenuity can device, and which are resorted to by one individual to secure an advantage over another by false suggestions or by suppression of truth and includes all surprise, trick, cunning, dissembling and any unfair way by which another is cheated. On the other hand, deceit is the false representation of a matter of fact whether by words or conduct, by false or misleading allegations, or by concealment of that which should have been disclosed which deceives or is intended to deceive another so that [they] shall act upon it to [their] legal injury. [43]

Specifically, false pretense is an intentional false statement concerning a material matter of fact. False pretense may be established by conduct and acts, as well as by words, written or spoken.

On the other hand, for concealment to be fraudulent, the purpose or design of which is to hide facts the other party sought to know. "Failure to reveal a fact [that] the seller is, in good faith, bound to disclose may generally be classified as a deceptive act due to its inherent capacity to deceive. Suppression of a material fact [that] a party is bound, in good faith, to disclose is equivalent to a false representation." [44]

In *Guinhawa v. People (Guinhawa)*, [45] the Court had the occasion to illustrate what constitutes fraudulent concealment punishable as Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC. In the said case, Guinhawa was a dealer of brand new cars in Naga City. He purchased a brand new L-300 van from the Union Motors Corporation in Manila to be resold in his office and display room in Naga City. However, on the way to Naga City, the van met an accident that caused it to be repaired for damages. Nevertheless, Guinhawa displayed the van in its show room, making it appear to the public that it was brand new. When complainants bought the van, Guinhawa never revealed that the same was defective. The complainants, within a few days after the sale of the van, soon discovered its defects. The Court held that Guinhawa's deliberate concealment of the van's defects is fraudulent

because as the seller, he had the duty to disclose materials facts, such as the real condition of the van.

The factual antecedents in Guinhawa, which prompted the Court to convict the accused therein of Other Deceits, are different from this case. Here, the CA even recognized in its decision, which the Court concurs with, that Consolacion did not make a direct and positive representation that Ireneville IV Subdivision is in good condition. The pieces of testimonial and documentary evidence of the prosecution are bereft of any categorical statement from Consolacion and L and C Marketing to that effect. Hence, the only remaining issue here is whether Consolacion's alleged concealment of the true condition of the subdivision (i.e., that it is prone to flooding, that the developer has failed to build and maintain the required facilities, and that the former developer was found guilty of violation of P.D. No 957) is fraudulent.

The Court answers in the negative.

In their affidavits and testimonies before the MeTC and even in their pleadings filed before the Court, private respondents harp on the alleged non-disclosure by the L and C Marketing that the housing units sold and turned over to them are "located in a water basin that was previously intended for agricultural irrigation" causing floods even during light rains. The private respondents likewise fault L and C Marketing for concealment of the defects and poor development of Ireneville IV Subdivision.[46]

However, as pointed out by Consolacion, Ireneville IV Subdivision is surrounded by many other subdivisions in the same area. If it was indeed a catch basin, the local government unit of Biñan, Laguna, as well as the other regulatory agencies, such as the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the HLURB, should not have granted the conversion of the land from agricultural to residential and would have denied the license to develop the area into a subdivision.

The failure of a developer to provide and maintain subdivision roads, drainage, proper water and lighting systems, and other basic necessities is subject to the penal provisions of P.D. No. 957. In fact, as claimed by the private respondent themselves, the developer of Ireneville IV Subdivision, Molera Realty, was previously convicted of violation of the provisions of P.D. No. 957. Hence, any incomplete development of Ireneville IV Subdivision is properly covered by the penal provisions of P.D. No. 957 and not the crime of Other Deceits as in this case.

Moreover, private respondents admitted that L and C Marketing brought them to Ireneville IV Subdivision for a tripping, before they decided to part with their money and to purchase house and lots from the former. Private respondents claimed that during the tripping, L and C Marketing brought them to the better part of the subdivision presumably to entice them to purchase the house and lots. Private respondents wanted this Court to believe that they never knew of the terrible condition of the subdivision, as L and C Marketing and Consolacion concealed this to them. However, one of the private respondents himself, Miravalles, stated in his affidavit, that:

x x x x

6. Itinakda ang aming tripping makalipas ang ilang araw at dinala kami sa lugar kung saan doon kami ipagtatayo ng bahay;

7. Una ko palang nakita ang lugar ay marami na akong nakitang depekto tulad ng (a) hindi sementado and kalsada, (b) walang gutter, (c) walang riprap ang creek, (d) walang secondary live wire and Meraldo at walang centralized water system.

x x x x[47]

The sworn statement of Miravalles contradicts the claim of private respondents that they were made to believe that the subdivision is in good condition. The only logical conclusion from this is that, private respondents

decided to purchase the house and lots from L and C Marketing despite the condition of the subdivision that they themselves visited prior to the purchase of the said housing units. Private respondents cannot likewise rely on the previous case for violation of P.D. No. 957 committed by the former developer of the subdivision to bolster their argument of fraudulent concealment. The violations of P.D. No. 957 only confirmed what Miravalles saw during the tripping that Molera Realty failed to provide the required facilities in the subdivision.

In Guinhawa, the Court also discussed the principle of caveat emptor, in this wise:

On the petitioner's insistence that the private complainant was proscribed from charging him with estafa based on the principle of caveat emptor, case law has it that this rule only requires the purchaser to exercise such care and attention as is usually exercised by ordinarily prudent men in like business affairs, and only applies to defects which are open and patent to the service of one exercising such care. In an avuncular case, it was held that:

x x x The rule of caveat emptor, like the rule of sweet charity, has often been invoked to cover a multitude of sins; but we think its protecting mantle has never been stretched to this extent. It can only be applied where it is shown or conceded that the parties to the contract stand on equal footing and have equal knowledge or equal means of knowledge and there is no relation of trust or confidence between them. But, where one party undertakes to sell to another property situated at a distance and of which [they have] or [claim] to have personal knowledge and of which the buyer knows nothing except as [they are] informed by the seller, the buyer may rightfully rely on the truth of the seller's representations as to its kind, quality, and value made in the course of negotiation for the purpose of inducing the purchase. If, in such case, the representations prove to be false, neither law nor equity will permit the seller to escape responsibility by the plea that the buyer ought not to have believed [them] or ought to have applied to other sources to ascertain the facts. x x x[48] (Citations omitted)

In this case, private respondents went to Ireneville IV Subdivision and personally saw the condition of the subdivision. To repeat, Consolacion did not represent that Ireneville IV Subdivision is in good condition. In fact, when private respondents visited the subdivision, they already noticed the defects during their tripping. This should have signaled private respondents to conduct their own due diligence and investigate further to safeguard their interests. The failure of private respondents to exercise such care and attention to their ordinary affairs will not give rise to the crime of Other Deceits against Consolacion.

In criminal cases, "[t]he overriding consideration is not whether the court doubts the innocence of the accused but whether it entertains a reasonable doubt as to [their] guilt. If there exist even one iota of doubt, this Court is under a long standing legal injunction to resolve the doubt in favor of the [accused]."[49]

Since Consolacion is acquitted for failure of the prosecution to prove all the elements of the crime of Other Deceits under Article 318(1) of the RPC, the Court no longer finds the need to discuss the other issues such as prescription and venue.

WHEREFORE, the Petition for Review on Certiorari is GRANTED. The Decision dated October 29, 2019 and the Resolution dated June 10, 2020 of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. SP No. 149739, which affirmed the conviction of petitioner Consolacion P. Marcos are hereby REVERSED and SET ASIDE. Accordingly, petitioner Consolacion P. Marcos is ACQUITTED.

SO ORDERED.

Leonen (Chairperson), Caguioa,[*] Zalameda, and Rosario, JJ., concur.

[*] Designated as additional Member per Special Order No. 2839 dated October 8, 2021.

[1] Rollo, pp. 3-32.

[2] Penned by Associate Justice Geraldine C. Fiel-Macaraig, with the concurrence of Associate Justices Japar B. Dimaampao (now a Member of this Court) and Edwin D. Sorongon; *id.* at 105-120.

[3] *Id.* at 134-135.

[4] *Id.* at 46.

[5] *Id.* at 47.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.* at 105-106.

[8] *Id.* at 106.

[9] *Id.* at 107.

[10] *Id.* at 108.

[11] *Id.* at 108-109.

[12] *Id.* at 53.

[13] *Id.* at 54.

[14] *Id.* at 110-111.

[15] Penned by Presiding Judge Analie B. Oga-Bruar; *id.* at 46-59.

[16] *Id.* at 59.

[17] *Id.* at 56.

[18] *Id.* at 56-57.

[19] *Id.* at 57.

[20] *Id.* at 58.

[21] *Id.*

[22] *Id.* at 40-45; penned by Presiding Judge Tita Marilyn Payoyo-Villordon.

[23] *Id.* at 45.

[24] *Id.* at 41.

[25] *Id.* at 42.

[26] *Id.* at 43.

[27] *Id.* at 44.

[28] *Supra* note 2.

[29] Rollo, pp. 113-114.

- [30] Id. at 115.
- [31] Id. at 117.
- [32] Id. at 119.
- [33] Id. at 134-135.
- [34] Id. at 3-32.
- [35] Id. at 15.
- [36] Id. at 587-619.
- [37] Id. at 595-596.
- [38] Id. at 624-647.
- [39] *Macayan, Jr. v. People*, 756 Phil. 202, 214 (2015).
- [40] *People v. Esteban*, 735 Phil. 663, 671 (2014).
- [41] *Guinhawa v. People*, 505 Phil. 383, 401 (2005).
- [42] 356 Phil. 362 (1998).
- [43] Id. at 382-383.
- [44] *Guinhawa v. People*, supra note 41 at 404.
- [45] Id.
- [46] Rollo, p. 18
- [47] Rollo, p. 21
- [48] *Guinhawa v. People*, supra note 41 at 406-407.
- [49] *People v. Cruz*, 736 Phil. 564 (2014).

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