

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. ROGELIO REYES GOMEZ A.K.A. PHILIP ROGER LACSON AND ROGER ELEAZAR GOMEZ, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.*G.R. Nos. 131946-47. February 08, 2000*

Ponente: BELLOSILLO, J.

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On 29 December 1995 an Information was filed before the Regional Trial Court of Parañaque charging Rogelio Gomez y Reyes a.k.a. Philip Roger Lacson or Roger Eleazar Gomez with illegal recruitment in large scale resulting in economic sabotage as defined and penalized under the provisions of Art. 38, par. (a), in relation to Arts. 13, par (b), 34 and 39 of PD 442 otherwise known as the Labor Code of the Philippines, as amended by PD Nos. 1920 and 2018,[1] docketed as Crim. Case No. 96-01. The Information alleged that Rogelio Gomez, without the requisite license or authority from the POEA, recruited seven (7) individuals, namely, Rebecca M. Talavera, Herminia S. Antones, Cynthia P. Castillo, Guillermo D. Gumabon Jr., Dionisio M. de los Reyes, Ramil del Rosario and Ronnie Agpalo for employment in Japan and charged them placement fees ranging from P65,000.00 to P160,000.00 each.[2]

On 10 January 1996 eight (8) Informations were also filed before the same court each charging Rogelio Gomez with estafa under par. 2, subpar. (a), Art. 315, of the Revised Penal Code, docketed as Crim. Cases Nos. 96-52 to 59.[3] Analiza G. Santos was added to the list of complainants as she also alleged that she was defrauded by the same accused.[4] The aforementioned criminal cases were consolidated under Crim. Cases Nos. 96-1 and 96-52 to 59.

Ronnie Agpalo, twenty-nine (29) years old, testified that in September of 1995 his brother-in-law then working in Japan called him up informing him that a certain Rogelio Gomez recruited and sent workers there.[5] After talking to Rogelio on the phone, Ronnie proceeded to the former's house at No. 912 Allanigue St., Barangay Village, Sucat, Parañaque, Metro Manila. At his house, Rogelio promised Ronnie that for a placement fee of P150,000.00 he could get him a job in Japan either as a construction worker or a factory worker where he would receive around 20 to 30 "lapad" per month.[6] Ronnie took the offer and paid P80,00.00 in cash while the balance of P70,000.00 would be deducted from his first salary.[7] On 18 November 1995, the day of his departure, Ronnie met with Rogelio and the latter handed him his passport and plane ticket. Upon receipt Rogelio noticed at once that his visa and plane ticket were both for China. But his doubts were assuaged when Rogelio promised that he would immediately follow him to China for his visa and ticket for Japan.[8]

Upon his arrival in China, Ronnie and some of the other complainants were billeted at the 21st Century Hotel in Beijing where they were instructed by a certain Pat Santos to wait for Rogelio's arrival. But Rogelio never came. When their funds ran low, Ronnie and his companions were forced to check-in at a cheaper hotel.[9] After a month-long wait without any news from Rogelio, Ronnie decided to go back to the Philippines. When he came home, he learned that Rogelio was being held at the NBI detention cell as he was facing charges of illegal

recruitment. On 23 December 1995 he proceeded to the NBI to demand a refund but Rogelio refused to repay him.[10] Thus, on 27 December 1995 Ronnie filed an affidavit of complaint before the NBI.[11]

Herminia S. Antones, twenty-nine (29) years old, testified that she was referred to Rogelio by her friend, a certain Josie Bulacan.[12] On 4 August 1995 Herminia went to Rogelio's house where he promised to get her a job as an entertainer for a placement fee of P100,000.00.[13] She agreed, and on 28 September 1995 she paid the fee in cash. On 18 November 1995 Herminia with some other applicants departed for China, all of them relying on Rogelio's promise that he would soon follow them there to issue their travel documents for Japan. But Rogelio never fulfilled his promise. On 9 December 1995 her resources severely depleted, she decided to come home, and on 11 December 1995 she executed an affidavit of complaint before the NBI charging Rogelio with illegal recruitment.[14]

Rebecca M. Talavera, thirty (30) years old, was another victim who fell prey to Rogelio's cunning scheme. Like the others she shelled out P100,000.00 as placement fee hoping to secure employment abroad.[15] Rogelio promised her that she would leave any time from 18 to 22 November 1995 but he was unable to make her depart on any of those dates prompting her to file a complaint before the NBI on 23 November 1995. However, due to accused's assurances that he would deploy her soon, she desisted from pursuing the case.[16] Finally, on 7 December 1995 she was about to leave for Japan when she noticed that the visa and plane ticket handed to her by Rogelio were both for China and that her passport bore the name Miriam Baldos Afable. Suspicious of such dubious travel arrangements, Rebecca opted to stay but the other applicants still left. After a few days, she received a call from one of them telling her that they were stranded in China. On 10 December 1995 Rebecca revived her previous complaint before the NBI.[17]

The other complainants, Guillermo D. Gumabon Jr., Dionisio M. de los Reyes, Cynthia P. Castillo and Ramil del Rosario virtually suffered the same fate. After learning from different sources that Rogelio deployed workers to Japan they all sought his home/office at No. 912 Allanigue St., Barangay Village, Sucat, Parañaque. There they met accused-appellant who promised them various jobs in Japan for placement fees ranging from P65,000.00 to P160,000.00. Except for Ramil del Rosario who flew to China on 7 December 1995, all of the other complainants left on 18 November 1995. On the day of their departure Rogelio handed them their travel documents whereupon they noticed that their visas and plane tickets were all for China. However, due to the haste of their upcoming flight and the assurances of the accused that he would follow them there, they hesitated to complain and reluctantly left for China. But true to form, Rogelio never arrived in China for their travel documents to Japan. One by one the complainants came home as they used up their remaining pocket money. Upon arrival, they learned that accused-appellant was detained at the NBI prompting them to file their separate affidavits of complaint.

NBI Special Investigator III Syrus Aluzan testified that on 23 November 1995 Rebecca M. Talavera filed an initial pro-forma complaint for illegal recruitment and estafa against Rogelio Gomez.[18] Upon the filing of the complaint he conducted a verification with the Records Division of the NBI where he unearthed eight (8) outstanding warrants of arrest against accused.[19] On 10 December 1995 Rebecca M. Talavera returned to the NBI station to execute an affidavit of complaint. On the morning of 13 December 1995 agent Aluzan with elements of the NBI arrested Rogelio Gomez at his home in Parañaque.[20]

Prosecution witness Graciano Ocos, Public Employment Officer of the POEA, testified that Rogelio was not licensed to recruit workers for Japan. He also verified the authenticity of the certification executed by Salome Mendoza,[21] Manager of the POEA Licensing Branch, that Rogelio Gomez was not authorized to recruit workers for overseas employment.[22]

Accused Rogelio Gomez denied that he promised employment to the complainants as he only worked as their travel consultant.[23] In reality, it was Herminia S. Antones who pledged jobs in Japan to the complainants. He claimed that Rebecca M. Talavera and Herminia S. Antones went to his house seeking a packaged tour to China for several people.[24] Treating the complainants as regular customers he arranged all their papers to China. However, two (2) days before their scheduled departure Herminia S. Antones and Josie Bulacan revealed their intention of surreptitiously sneaking the complainants into Japan on their way back from China. Their plan was to disembark the complainants at the Narita Airport as chance passengers during the stopover of the flight from China to Manila.[25] Upon learning this, Rogelio made the complainants execute quitclaims to obtain evidence that he was only involved as a travel consultant and that he never participated in Herminia's illegal scheme.[26] However, according to him, when Herminia failed to procure employment for the complainants they all colluded with each other to file false charges against him for illegal recruitment. He claimed that even NBI agent Syrus Aluzan was a cohort of Herminia as he attempted to exact P240,000.00 from him for the immediate dismissal of his case.[27] Thus, he was merely a scapegoat, framed up by Herminia, the complainants and NBI agent Aluzan.

The trial court did not give credence to Rogelio's testimony. On 26 September 1997 he was convicted of illegal recruitment in a large scale for which he was sentenced to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and to pay a fine of P100,000.00. He was also found guilty of eight counts of estafa for which he was sentenced to suffer a penalty of six (6) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days to eight (8) years for each count and to indemnify the following: Guillermo D. Gumabon Jr. - P150,000.00, Rebecca M. Talavera - P100,000.00, Herminia S. Antones - P100,000.00, Ramil del Rosario - P150,000.00, Cynthia P. Castillo - P160,000.00, Ronnie Agpalo - P80,000.00, Dionisio M. de los Reyes - P65,000.00 and Analiza G. Santos - P150,000.00, less whatever amounts Rogelio incurred in securing their passports/visas, transportation and miscellaneous expenses.[28]

Rogelio Gomez now appeals the Decision of the RTC arguing that (a) he was unlawfully arrested by the NBI agents headed by NBI Special Investigator III Syrus Aluzan; (b) the trial court erred in denying his application for bail after his arraignment; and, (c) the trial court erred in finding him guilty beyond reasonable doubt.[29]

Anent the first issue, we have consistently ruled that any objection to the warrant of arrest or the procedure in the acquisition by the court of jurisdiction over the person of the accused must be made before he enters his plea, otherwise the objection is deemed waived.[30] Thus, if he fails to move for the quashing of the information against him before his arraignment he may be estopped from assailing the illegality of his arrest.[31] Records show that accused-appellant was arraigned on 31 January 1996 where he entered a plea of not guilty.[32] Prior to such date he did not file any motion to quash the Information. Hence, it is now too late for him to question the legality of his arrest.

Regarding the issue of bail, accused-appellant argues that although his counsel was given the chance to cross-examine the prosecution witnesses at the bail hearings, he was not given the opportunity to submit rebuttal evidence to disprove that the evidence of his guilt was strong. In such cases, where the prosecution was not given the chance to present evidence to prove that the guilt of the accused was strong, we held that the proper remedy was for him to file a petition for certiorari under Rule 65.[33] This same principle must apply to cases where the defense was not accorded a chance to present any rebuttal evidence. When the trial court denied his application for bail accused-appellant should have filed a petition for certiorari before the appellate court.[34] Hence, it is also too late for him to question the trial court's decision of denying his application for bail. Besides, the conviction of accused-appellant undoubtedly proves that the evidence of guilt against him was strong.[35]

The more significant issue at hand is whether the culpability of accused-appellant for illegal recruitment in large scale and estafa has been proved beyond reasonable doubt.

Under the Labor Code, there are three (3) elements which constitute illegal recruitment in large scale. First, the accused undertakes any recruitment activity defined under Art. 13, par. (b), or any practice enumerated under Art. 34 of the Labor Code; second, the accused does not comply with the guidelines issued by the Secretary of Labor and Employment, particularly with respect to the securing of a license or authority to recruit and deploy workers, either locally or overseas; and third, the accused commits the same against three (3) or more persons, individually or as a group.[36]

Accused-appellant argues that the prosecution failed to establish the first element since he never actively enticed the applicants and neither did he advertise himself as a recruiter. On the contrary, the complainants were the ones who voluntarily went to him to procure his services as a travel agent. Thus, he could not in any way be considered as a recruiter.

On several occasions, this Court has held that there is illegal recruitment when one purports to have the ability to send a worker abroad although without the authority or license to do so. He may merely give such an impression in order to induce an applicant to tender payment for fees.[37] Although accused-appellant initially might not have done anything to encourage individuals to apply to him for employment abroad, such fact does not in any way blot out his liability for illegal recruitment. Recruitment is a legal term; its meaning must be understood in the light of what the law contemplates and not of common parlance.[38] Thus, even if Rogelio did not purposely seek out the complainants to apply as workers in Japan, his subsequent false misrepresentations that he had the capacity to procure employment for them, without authority from the POEA, made him liable for illegal recruitment.

Accused-appellant repeatedly stresses that the receipts he issued to the complainants which contained the words "in payment for travel services," prove that they were well aware of the fact that he only worked as their travel agent. Such contention is too shallow to exculpate him from liability. It may be true that, as pointed out by accused-appellant, all the complainants completely understood the meaning of "in payment for travel services." But it must be remembered that these people were desperate for employment abroad. They would blindly sign any document just to attain their dream of securing a job in Japan.

Furthermore, such words written on the receipts cannot undermine the testimony of the complainants that they paid good money to accused-appellant in exchange for his promise of employment overseas. As a matter of fact, even the absence of receipts cannot defeat a criminal prosecution for illegal recruitment.[39] As long as the witnesses can positively show through their respective testimonies that the accused is the one involved in prohibited recruitment, he may be convicted of the offense despite the absence of receipts.[40]

Accused-appellant also contends that the pro-forma quitclaims executed by the complainants establish his innocence and thus exempts him from culpability. Contrary to his argument we believe that the existence of quitclaims only strengthens the complainants' allegations. If accused-appellant was merely a travel agent, then why would he require his clients to sign quitclaims? Obviously, these documents were executed to avoid any liability arising from his fraudulent design.

Although it is true that quitclaims and waivers when freely agreed upon are generally recognized, the law will not hesitate to step in and annul these transactions if it can be seen that they were obtained under duress.[41] A perusal of the quitclaims shows that they were signed on the day the complainants departed for China.[42] Accused-appellant made them sign the documents amidst a setting filled with anxiety, confusion and haste wherein the complainants would do just about anything to be able to leave the Philippines. Surely, there can be no other conclusion than that accused-appellant carefully timed his move to prod complainants into signing the quitclaims against their better judgment.

We therefore see no compelling reason to overturn the factual findings of the court a quo. Factual findings of trial courts on credibility of witnesses deserve a high degree of respect.[43] Thus, unless there is a strong and valid reason for overturning the factual assessment by the trial court, this Court will not disturb its findings on appeal.[44]

As for the conviction of accused-appellant for estafa on eight (8) counts, we have ruled that the conviction of an accused for illegal recruitment under the Labor Code will not preclude punishment under the Revised Penal Code.[45] The elements of estafa under Art. 315, par. 2, subpar. (a), of the Revised Penal Code are: (a) the accused has defrauded another by abuse of confidence or by means of deceit and (b) damage by pecuniary estimation is caused to the offended party or third person.[46] Clearly it can be seen that both elements were satisfied as accused-appellant, through deceit and abuse of confidence, obtained money from the complainants without fulfilling his promise of securing employment for them in Japan.

However, we disagree that accused-appellant should be convicted of eight (8) counts of estafa since the allegations in the Information in behalf of Analiza Santos were not adequately established. She was never presented to testify and neither was there any documentary evidence to prove that she was one of the victims duped by accused-appellant. Thus, accused-appellant should be convicted of only seven (7) counts of estafa.

In Crim. Cases Nos. 96-52 and 96-55, the amount defrauded of each complainant was P150,000.00. In consonance with Art. 315 of the Revised Penal Code, the imposable penalty is prision correccional in its maximum period to prision mayor in its minimum period, the range of which is four (4) years two (2) months and one (1) day to five (5) years five (5) months and ten (10) days as minimum while the medium period is from five (5) years five (5) months and eleven (11) days to six (6) years eight (8) months and (20) twenty days, and the maximum is six (6) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days to eight (8) years. Since the amount of P150,000.00 was defrauded in each case, the maximum penalty should be taken from the maximum period of the penalty prescribed, plus one (1) year for every P10,000.00 in excess of P22,000.00 which in these two (2) cases is equivalent to twelve (12) additional years. Hence the maximum imposable penalty should be eighteen (18) years eight (8) months and twenty one (21) days to twenty (20) years of reclusion temporal maximum. Applying the Indeterminate Sentence Law and the principle in *People v. Saley*,[47] the minimum penalty shall be within the range of the penalty next lower in degree to that prescribed in the Code, i.e., prision correccional minimum to prision correccional medium in any of its periods. Prision correccional minimum to prision correccional medium ranges from (6) months and one (1) day, to four (4) years and two (2) months. Thus the maximum imposable penalty for Crim. Cases Nos. 96-52 and 96-55 is from eighteen (18) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days to twenty (20) years of reclusion temporal while the minimum imposable penalty is from six (6) months and one (1) day to four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional.

The same principle would apply to Crim. Cases Nos. 96-53 and 96-54, where the amount defrauded in each case was P100,000.00. Thus, the maximum range of the imposable penalty is from thirteen (13) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days to fifteen (15) years of reclusion temporal, while the minimum imposable penalty is from prision correccional minimum to prision correccional medium.

In Crim. Case No. 96-56 where the amount defrauded was P160,000.00, the range of the maximum imposable penalty is from nineteen (19) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days to twenty (20) years of reclusion temporal while the minimum imposable penalty is from prision correccional minimum to prision correccional medium.

In Crim. Case No 96-57 involving the amount of P80,000.00, the range of the maximum imposable penalty is from eleven (11) years (8) months and twenty-one (21) days of prision mayor to thirteen (13) years of reclusion

temporal while the minimum imposable penalty is from prision correccional minimum to prision correccional medium.

And finally, in Crim. Case No. 96-58 where the amount involved is P65,000.00, the range of the maximum imposable penalty is from ten (10) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days of prision mayor to twelve (12) years of reclusion temporal while the minimum imposable penalty is from prision correccional minimum to prision correccional medium.

The trial court erred in deducting from the indemnities granted the complainants the amounts accused-appellant reportedly spent in procuring their passports, Chinese visas, plane tickets and other miscellaneous expenses. Perhaps the lower court thought that the complainants would be unjustly enriched if no deductions were made since after all they were able to get their visas and travel to China through the services performed by accused-appellant. However, it is also evident that the complainants had no intention of spending their hard-earned money for a sidetrip to China and incur unnecessary travel expenses. Their stay in Beijing only caused deep regret and frustration. They should therefore be fully reimbursed for whatever amounts they paid to accused-appellant because of his misrepresentations and false promises.

WHEREFORE, the assailed Decision of the trial court insofar as it found accused-appellant Rogelio Gomez y Reyes a.k.a. Philip Roger Lacson or Roger Eleazar Gomez guilty of Illegal Recruitment in a Large Scale for which he was sentenced to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and to pay a fine of P100,000.00 is AFFIRMED. It is however MODIFIED in that accused-appellant is found GUILTY of only seven (7) counts of estafa, not eight (8), under par. 2, subpar. (a), Art. 315 of the Revised Penal Code and is accordingly sentenced to suffer the following penalties:

In Crim. Cases Nos. 96-52 and 96-55 involving the amount of P150,000.00, accused-appellant is sentenced to suffer the indeterminate prison term of four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional medium as minimum to eighteen (18) years eight (8) months and twenty one (21) days of reclusion temporal maximum as maximum.

In Crim. Cases Nos. 96-53 and 54 involving the amount of P100,000.00, accused-appellant is sentenced to suffer an indeterminate prison term of four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional medium as minimum to thirteen (13) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days of reclusion temporal minimum as maximum.

In Crim. Case No. 96-56 involving the amount of P160,000.00, accused-appellant is sentenced to suffer an indeterminate prison term of four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional medium as minimum to nineteen (19) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days of reclusion temporal maximum as maximum.

In Crim. Case No 96-57 involving the amount of P80,000.00, accused-appellant is sentenced to suffer an indeterminate prison term of four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional medium as minimum to eleven (11) years (8) months and twenty-one (21) days of prision mayor maximum as maximum.

And finally, in Crim. Case No. 96-58 involving the amount of P65,000.00, accused-appellant is sentenced to suffer an indeterminate prison term of four (4) years and two (2) months of prision correccional medium as minimum to ten (10) years eight (8) months and twenty-one (21) days of prision mayor maximum as maximum.

Accused-appellant is further ordered to pay the complaining witnesses the following amounts: Guillermo D. Gumabon Jr. - P150,000.00, Rebecca M. Talavera - P100,000.00, Herminia S. Antones - P100,000.00, Ramil del Rosario - P150,000.00, Cynthia P. Castillo - P160,000.00, Ronnie Agpalo - P80,000.00, and Dionisio M. de los Reyes - P65,000.00 without any deductions whatsoever. Costs against accused-appellant.

SO ORDERED.

Mendoza, Quisumbing, Buena, and De Leon, Jr., JJ., concur.

- [1] Art. 38, P.D. 442.
- [2] Records, p. 7.
- [3] Id., pp. 37-102.
- [4] Id., p. 95.
- [5] TSN, 26 June 1996, p. 9.
- [6] TSN, 6 March 1996, p. 6.
- [7] Id., p. 7.
- [8] Id., p. 12.
- [9] Id., p. 20.
- [10] Id., p. 13.
- [11] Id., p. 15.
- [12] TSN, 12 September 1996, p. 20.
- [13] Sinumpaang Salaysay; Records, p. 17.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Records, p. 15.
- [16] TSN, 9 September 1996, p. 13.
- [17] Records, p. 15.
- [18] TSN, 9 September 1996, p. 46.
- [19] Id., p. 40.
- [20] Id., p. 41.
- [21] Records, p. 215.
- [22] TSN, 26 June 1996, pp. 4-7.
- [23] TSN, 26 February 1997, p. 14.
- [24] Id., p. 11.
- [25] Id., p. 40.
- [26] Id., p. 16.
- [27] Id, p. 23.
- [28] Decision of Judge Helen Bautista-Ricafort, RTC-Br. 60, Parañaque, Metro Manila; Records, p. 348.

[29] Rollo, p. 66.

[30] *People v. Mahusay*, G.R. No. 91483, 18 November 1997, 282 SCRA 80; *Padilla v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 121917, 12 March 1997, 269 SCRA 402.

[31] *People v. Hernandez*, G.R. No. 120330, 18 November 1997, 282 SCRA 166.

[32] Records, p. 117.

[33] *People v. Bocar*, No. L-27120, 28 March 1969, 27 SCRA 512; *Alvarado v. Laquindanum*, A.M. No. MTJ-93-835, 3 July 1995, 245 SCRA 510.

[34] *People v. Intermediate Appellate Court*, G.R. Nos. 66939-41, 10 January 1987, 147 SCRA 219.

[35] *People v. Divina*, G.R. Nos. 93808-09 and 94073-74, 7 April 1993, 221 SCRA 1993.

[36] *People v. Enriquez*, G.R. No. 127159, 5 May 1999.

[37] *People v. Villas*, G.R. No. 112180, 15 August 1997, 277 SCRA 391.

[38] *Flores v. People*, G.R. Nos. 93411-12, 20 July 1992, 211 SCRA 622.

[39] See Note 37.

[40] *People v. Pabalan*, G.R. Nos. 115356 and 117819, 30 September 1996, 262 SCRA 574.

[41] *AG&P United Rank and File Association v. NLRC*, G.R. No. 108259, 29 November 1996, 265 SCRA 159.

[42] Records, pp. 259-269.

[43] *People v. Borromeo*, G.R. No. 117154, 25 March 1999.

[44] *People v. Bermudez*, G.R. No. 122903, 25 June 1999.

[45] *People v. Calonzo*, G.R. Nos. 115150-55, 27 September 1996, 262 SCRA 534; *People v. Saley*, G.R. No. 121179, 2 July 1998, 291 SCRA 715.

[46] *People v. Romero*, G.R. Nos. 103385 - 88, 26 July 1993, 224 SCRA 755.

[47] G.R. No. 121179, 2 July 1998, 291 SCRA 715.

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