

FIRST DIVISION

[A.M. No. RTJ-20-2584(formerly OCA IPI No. 18-4841-RTJ), July 28, 2020]

HORTENCIA R. CAYABYAB, COMPLAINANT, VS. PRESIDING JUDGE IRINEO P. PANGILINAN, JR., REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, BRANCH 58, ANGELES CITY, PAMPANGA, RESPONDENT.

D E C I S I O N

CAGUIOA, J:

This is an administrative complaint^[1] against Judge Irineo P. Pangilinan, Jr. (Judge Pangilinan), former Presiding Judge of the Municipal Trial Court in Cities of Angeles City, Branch 1, and now Presiding Judge of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Angeles City, Branch 58, for alleged undue delay in rendering a decision, for knowingly rendering an unjust judgment and gross ignorance of the law.

The Case

Complainant Hortencia R. Cayabyab (Cayabyab) was the private complainant in Criminal Case No. 10-5530 entitled "*People of the Philippines v. Maria Melissa Cayabyab y Robles*" for Perjury filed before the court of Judge Pangilinan. Cayabyab charged her adopted daughter, the accused, of "willfully, unlawfully and feloniously executing] an Affidavit of Loss, stating under oath that the owner's duplicate copy of Transfer Certificate of Title [(TCT) N]o. 92191 was lost, when in truth and in fact, [the] accused kn[e]w very well that [it was] in the possession of [Cayabyab]."^[2]

Cayabyab avers that the promulgation of judgment of Criminal Case No. 10-5530 was originally set on July 28, 2016. Despite no request for extension of time from Judge Pangilinan within which to decide the case, the promulgation was reset thrice. It was only on October 20, 2016 when Judge Pangilinan handed down a decision acquitting the accused.^[3]

Cayabyab asserts further that Judge Pangilinan exhibited gross ignorance of the law and prevailing jurisprudence in his decision. She points out the categorical finding of Judge Pangilinan therein that the accused deliberately executed the affidavit of loss subject of the case with the knowledge that the owner's duplicate copy of title was not missing but was actually in the possession of Cayabyab. Cayabyab stresses that this was proof enough of the accused's willful and deliberate assertion of falsehood, which was a material fact since it would be used in the petition for issuance of a new certificate of title and an eventual sale of the property. Despite this finding, however, Judge Pangilinan acquitted the accused because her lying was done without malice or evil intent, considering that the accused was the registered owner of the property under TCT No. 92191 and could very well, therefore, sell the property.^[4]

Cayabyab points out that the decision of Judge Pangilinan was reversed and set

aside for having been issued with grave abuse of discretion in a Decision^[5] by Judge Irin Zenaida S. Buan (Judge Buan) of the RTC of Angeles City, Branch 56.^[6]

Finally, Cayabyab relays to the Court the information she received during the pendency of Criminal Case No. 10-5530 that the accused and Judge Pangilinan belong to the same church and that a pastor from their congregation interceded before Judge Pangilinan on behalf of the accused.^[7]

In his Comment,^[8] Judge Pangilinan counters that the complaint merits an outright dismissal for being malicious, baseless, and unfounded. He labels the complaint as mere harassment after Cayabyab received an unfavorable decision in Criminal Case No. 10-5530. Judge Pangilinan asserts that her remedy as a litigant lies with the courts and not with the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA).^[9]

Judge Pangilinan also denies that there was delay in deciding Criminal Case No. 10-5530. He claims that its promulgation was originally scheduled on June 16, 2016. Hence, when the promulgation was reset to July 28, 2016, it was still within the 90-day period under the Constitution within which to decide a case.^[10]

Judge Pangilinan also explains that the parties had several pending suits in his sala and knowing their familial relationship, he only wanted them to eventually reconcile. He categorically denies knowing the accused personally or of having met her at all. He finds malice in the allegations of Cayabyab that he let a pastor intervene on behalf of the accused. Judge Pangilinan stresses the fact that Cayabyab did not even attempt to file a motion for his inhibition if she indeed doubted his impartiality.^[11]

Report and Recommendation

In its Report and Recommendation,^[12] the OCA found merit in the allegation that Judge Pangilinan caused undue delay in rendering a decision when Criminal Case No. 10-5530 was promulgated only on October 20, 2016, or after four (4) months from the time the case was submitted for decision on June 16, 2016. The OCA found his explanation of exerting efforts to have the parties come to an amicable agreement untenable in light of this glaring proof that there was delay in deciding the case within the period fixed by law. Noting the penalties prescribed under Rule 140 of the Rules of Court, as amended, the OCA saw it fit to temper the penalty to a reprimand, considering that this is Judge Pangilinan's first offense for undue delay in rendering a decision.^[13]

As with the charges of knowingly rendering an unjust judgment and gross ignorance of the law, the OCA recommended that these be dropped. The OCA held that Cayabyab failed to discharge her burden to prove that Judge Pangilinan was moved by bad faith, dishonesty, hatred, or some like motive when he ruled on Criminal Case No. 10-5530. In particular, Cayabyab failed to prove that Judge Pangilinan acquitted the accused simply because they belong to the same church.^[14]

The OCA likewise held that the propriety of Judge Pangilinan's decision was a judicial matter and beyond the mandate of this administrative proceeding. Even if the RTC of Angeles City, Branch 56 had reversed and set aside Criminal Case No. 10-5530 for having been issued with grave abuse of discretion, the OCA held that a finding of

grave abuse of discretion alone is not a ground for disciplinary proceedings. A judge's failure to interpret the law or to properly appreciate the evidence presented does not necessarily render him or her administratively liable, absent any proof that his or her judicial errors are tainted with fraud, dishonesty, gross ignorance, bad faith, or deliberate intent to do injustice.^[15]

The Issue

Whether Judge Pangilinan should be administratively held liable for undue delay in rendering a decision, of knowingly rendering an unjust judgment and gross ignorance of the law.

The Court's Ruling

The Court agrees with the findings of the OCA, with a modification on the penalty imposed on Judge Pangilinan.

Article VIII, Section 15 of the 1987 Constitution expressly prescribes that all cases or matters must be decided or resolved by the lower courts within three (3) months from date of submission. In parallel, Canon 6, Section 5 of the New Code of Judicial Conduct^[16] requires judges to perform all judicial duties, including the delivery of reserved decisions, efficiently, fairly and with reasonable promptness. Hence, in deciding Criminal Case No. 10-5530 four (4) months after it was submitted for decision, Judge Pangilinan had clearly incurred delay.

Judge Pangilinan explains that the delay was due to his desire to have the parties settle the case amicably. This justification, to the mind of the Court, is not reasonable under the circumstances, considering that the criminal case of perjury was a case against public interest which had already reached the conclusion of its trial proper.

Also, in cases where a judge is unable to comply with the reglementary period for deciding cases or matters, he or she can, for good reasons, ask for an extension from the Court. As a general rule, requests for extension are granted by the Court in cognizance of the heavy caseload of the trial courts.^[17] Granting that Judge Pangilinan had good reasons for his delay, it remains a given fact that he failed to ask for an extension of time from the Court within which to resolve Criminal Case No. 10-5530. Judges, by themselves, cannot extend the period for deciding cases beyond that authorized by law.^[18] As a result of his failure to ask for extension, whether deliberate or not, Judge Pangilinan promulgated his decision in Criminal Case No. 10-5530 beyond the period allowed by law.

Time and again, the Court has impressed upon judges the importance of deciding cases promptly and expeditiously because the notion of delay in the disposition of cases and matters undermines the people's faith and confidence in the judiciary.^[19] The honor and integrity of the judicial system is measured not only by the fairness and correctness of decisions rendered, but also by the efficiency with which disputes are resolved.^[20] As it happens here, the number of times that the promulgation date of Criminal Case No. 10-5530 was re-scheduled and the consequent undue delay in resolving it have, actually, raised a nagging doubt in Cayabyab's mind that something irregular was afoot. This is the kind of misgiving from the public that the

Court wants to prevent. At the same time, any delay in the administration of justice, *no matter how brief*, deprives the litigant of his or her right to a speedy disposition of his or her case.^[21]

Classified as a less serious charge under Section 9, Rule 140 of the Rules of Court, as amended, undue delay in rendering a decision or order is penalized with either suspension without pay for a period of not less than one (1) month, but not more than three (3) months, or a fine of more than P10,000.00, but not more than P20,000.00. The OCA recommended that Judge Pangilinan be merely reprimanded on the ground that this is his first offense for undue delay in rendering a decision. In its Report and Recommendation, however, the OCA noted that Judge Pangilinan was previously reprimanded with warning by the Court in A.M. No. RTJ-18- 2544 entitled "*The Station Commander, Mabalacat City Police Station v. Judge Irineo P. Pangilinan, Jr.*" for gross ignorance of the law. Thus, under the circumstances, the Court deems the penalty of fine in the amount of P10,000.00 appropriate.

As with the other charges of knowingly rendering an unjust judgment and gross ignorance of the law, the Court affirms the recommendation of the OCA to dismiss these charges.

Knowingly rendering an unjust judgment constitutes a serious criminal offense under Article 204 of the Revised Penal Code (RPC). To commit the offense, the offender must be a judge who is adequately shown to have rendered an unjust judgment, not one who merely committed an error of judgment or taken the unpopular side of a controversial point of law.^[22] In *In re AMA Land, Inc.*,^[23] the Court held that when the administrative charge equates to a criminal offense, such that the judicial officer may suffer the heavy sanctions of dismissal from the service, the showing of culpability on the part of the judicial officer should be nothing short of proof beyond reasonable doubt, especially because the charge is penal in character.^[24] Thus, the Court therein elucidated on the elements of the offense of knowingly rendering an unjust judgment in this wise:

x x x The term knowingly means "sure knowledge, conscious and deliberate intention to do an injustice." Thus, the complainant must not only prove beyond reasonable doubt that the judgment is patently contrary to law or not supported by the evidence but that it was also made with deliberate intent to perpetrate an injustice. Good faith and the absence of malice, corrupt motives or improper consideration are sufficient defenses that will shield a judge from the charge of rendering an unjust decision. In other words, the judge was motivated by hatred, revenge, greed or some other similar motive in issuing the judgment.

Bad faith is, therefore, the ground for liability, x x x^[25]

In the same manner, gross ignorance of the law is the disregard of basic rules and settled jurisprudence.^[26] Where the law is straightforward and the facts so evident, failure to know it or to act as if one does not know it constitutes gross ignorance of the law. A judge is presumed to have acted with regularity and good faith in the performance of judicial functions. But a blatant disregard of a clear and unmistakable provision of the Constitution upends this presumption and subjects the magistrate to corresponding administrative sanctions.^[27] Thus, in *Office of the Court Administrator v. Dumayas*,^[28] the Court held that since the violated