



REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES
SUPREME COURT
Manila

SECOND DIVISION

NOTICE

Sirs/Mesdames:

*Please take notice that the Court, Second Division, issued a Resolution dated **28 February 2022** which reads as follows:*

“A.M. No. RTJ-20-2601 [Formerly OCA IPI No. 16-4604-RTJ] (Joy Ann O. Sese and Lerma O. Sese v. Hon. Manuel B. Sta. Cruz, Jr., Presiding Judge, Regional Trial Court of Quezon City, Branch 226 [RTC]). –

RESOLUTION

The Court **NOTES** the letter¹ dated March 5, 2021 of respondent Presiding Judge Manuel B. Sta. Cruz, Jr. (respondent), manifesting that he is willing to submit the instant case for decision/resolution on the basis of the pleadings already filed, in compliance with the Resolution² dated December 9, 2020.

For the Court’s resolution is a Complaint³ dated July 22, 2016 filed by complainants Joy Ann O. Sese (Joy) and Lerma O. Sese (Lerma; collectively, complainants) charging respondent with Gross Ignorance of the Law, Gross Dereliction of Duty, and Evident Bias.

The Facts

Complainants averred that Joy is the registered owner of a parcel of land located in Project 8, Bahay Toro, Quezon City, which is the subject property in an unlawful detainer case pending before the Metropolitan Trial Court in Quezon City, Branch 33 (MeTC), where she is the plaintiff and spouses Jimmy Angeles and Ma. Luisa Baetiong-Angeles (Spouses Angeles) are the defendants.⁴ To counter the said case, Spouses Angeles filed a complaint for reconveyance of title and issuance of writ of preliminary injunction and/or temporary restraining order before the *sala* of respondent.⁵ In an Order⁶ dated July 22, 2015, respondent granted the writ of preliminary injunction and accordingly, enjoined complainants

¹ *Rollo*, p. 130.

² *Id.* at 128-129.

³ Titled ‘Verified Complaint/Letter Affidavit,’ *id.* at 1-8.

⁴ *Id.* at 2.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 83-87.

from further proceeding with the ejectment case pending before the MeTC. On September 11, 2015, complainants filed a motion for reconsideration of the Order dated July 22, 2015.⁷ Eager to rule on the motion, on October 27, 2015, complainants filed a Most Respectful Motion to Resolve,⁸ and on December 14, 2015, filed a Second Most Respectful Motion to Resolve.⁹ However, instead of acting on the motions, on March 11, 2016, respondent issued an Order¹⁰ noting the motions and referring the case to the same court for pre-trial after the judicial dispute resolution (JDR) failed and thus, complainants filed a Motion to Refer Case to the Office of the Clerk of Court¹¹ for re-raffling. The foregoing prompted complainants to file a complaint before the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA), charging respondent with Gross Ignorance of the Law, Gross Dereliction of Duty, and Evident Bias.¹²

For his part, respondent contended that in several cases, the Supreme Court has recognized the necessity to suspend unlawful detainer proceedings in whatever stage these may be found to await the final judgment in a more substantive case involving possession or ownership. With respect to the unresolved motions, respondent posited that he already ruled on the Motion for Reconsideration to the Order dated July 22, 2015 in an Order dated August 30, 2016. Moreover, he stated that all documents pertaining to the case were only brought to his attention on March 11, 2016, when the case folder was returned to the court, and thus, he issued an order the same day noting the motions and setting the case for pre-trial. During the semestral inventory on July 2016, it was discovered that complainants already filed a Comment/Opposition to the motion for reconsideration as early as October 5, 2015, and thus, respondent issued the Order¹³ dated August 1, 2016, submitting the incident for resolution. He admitted the delay and took full responsibility for it. He explained that he is a paraplegic, and with the condition of his office being located in the Annex Building, he is having a very difficult time to roam around his office. Moreover, despite of not having a clerk of court since July 2015, he struggled to manage to dispose the case assigned to him with dispatch. If there might have been any lapse on his part, the same was not, in anyway, purposely done to cause prejudice to complainants.¹⁴ As regards the re-raffling of the case, respondent maintained that both parties were aware that the case shall be transmitted back to his court in case the JDR fails, as shown in the Order dated September 18, 2015,¹⁵ which is in accordance with the Operations Manual for Dispute Resolution.¹⁶

The Office of the Court Administrator Report and Recommendation

In its Memorandum¹⁷ dated October 8, 2020, the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) recommended that respondent be found guilty of Gross

⁷ Id. at 51-60.

⁸ Id. at 62-63.

⁹ Id. at 64-65.

¹⁰ Id. at 66.

¹¹ Id. at 67-70.

¹² See id. at 1-8.

¹³ Id. at 99.

¹⁴ Id. at 79-80.

¹⁵ Id. at 95.

¹⁶ See id.

¹⁷ Id. at 120-126. Signed by Court Administrator Jose Midas P. Marquez (now a Member of the Court) and Assistant Court Administrator Lilian C. Barribal-Co.

Inefficiency and Delay in the Administration of Justice, and be fined in the amount of ₱11,000.00 payable within thirty (30) days from receipt of notice, with a warning that the commission of the same or similar offense shall be dealt with more severely; and the charges for Gross Ignorance of the Law and Bias be dismissed for lack of merit and for being judicial in nature.¹⁸

The OCA stressed that its office is in charge of administrative supervision of courts and is not a venue for interpretation and determination of the propriety of a court's order, resolution, or decision, which complainants sought in this case.¹⁹ With regard to the charge of Gross Ignorance of the Law, the OCA stated that while the charge was anchored on judicial arguments and bases, complainants failed to demonstrate that respondent was motivated by bad faith, fraud, corruption, dishonesty, or egregious errors in rendering his orders. Moreover, the OCA noted that complainants failed to substantiate the charge of Bias with substantial evidence. However, the OCA found that respondent should be sanctioned for delay, as it took twelve (12) months for him to rule on the motion for reconsideration and around ten (10) months to issue his order submitting said pending incident, including the Motion to Refer the Case to the Office of the Clerk of Court, for resolution. It explained that respondent's excuses (*i.e.*, discovery of the pleadings only on semestral inventory, equally important administrative and judicial obligations, and sheer volume of work) cannot be used as justifications to avoid liability.²⁰

The Issue Before the Court

The issue for the Court's resolution is whether or not respondent should be held administratively liable.

The Court's Ruling

After a judicious study of the case, the Court adopts the findings and the recommendation of the OCA except as to the recommended penalty.

Gross ignorance of the law is the disregard of basic rules and settled jurisprudence. A judge may also be administratively liable if shown to have been motivated by bad faith, fraud, dishonesty or corruption in ignoring, contradicting or failing to apply settled law and jurisprudence. Though not every judicial error bespeaks ignorance of the law and that, if committed in good faith, does not warrant administrative sanction, the same applies only in cases within the parameters of tolerable misjudgment.²¹ **For liability to attach for ignorance of the law, the assailed order, decision or actuation of the judge in the performance of official duties must not only be found erroneous but, most importantly, it must also be established that he was moved by bad faith, dishonesty, hatred, or some other like motive.**²² (Emphases supplied)

¹⁸ Id. at 126.

¹⁹ Id. at 123.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ *DOJ v. Judge Mislang*, 791 Phil. 219, 227 (2016).

²² Id.

Here, as correctly found by the OCA, complainants failed to demonstrate, through substantial evidence, that respondent was motivated by bad faith, fraud, corruption, or dishonesty in rendering the subject orders. Neither were complainants able to substantiate their claim of evident bias. As such, respondent cannot be held administratively liable for Gross Ignorance of the Law and Evident Bias.

However, as also found by the OCA, respondent must be held administratively liable for undue delay in rendering a decision or order.

Under Rule 3.05, Canon 3 of the Code of Judicial Conduct, '[a] judge shall dispose of the court's business promptly and decide cases within the required periods.' This is echoed in Section 5, Canon 6 of the New Code of Judicial Conduct for the Philippine Judiciary which provides that '[j]udges shall perform all judicial duties, including the delivery of reserved decisions, efficiently, fairly, and with reasonable promptness.'

As explained by the Court in *Dulang v. Judge Regencia*,²³ '[p]rompt disposition of cases is attained basically through the efficiency and dedication to duty of judges. If judges do not possess those traits, delay in the disposition of cases is inevitable to the prejudice of the litigants. Accordingly, judges should be imbued with a high sense of duty and responsibility in the discharge of their obligation to administer justice promptly.'²⁴

Here, records show that it took twelve (12) months for respondent to rule on the motion for reconsideration and around ten (10) months to issue his order submitting said pending incident, including the Motion to Refer the Case to the Office of the Clerk of Court, for resolution. This is way beyond the reglementary period of ninety (90) days, within which judges must resolve motions or incidents pending before them.²⁵ As such, as the OCA properly observed, respondent is administratively liable for gross inefficiency and undue delay in rendering a decision or order, which is considered as a less serious charge under Section 23 of Rule 140²⁶ of the Rules of Court, and – during that time the OCA issued its recommendation – was punishable by either (a) suspension from office without salary and other benefits for not less than one (1) month nor more than three (3) months; or (b) a fine of more than ₱10,000.00 but not exceeding ₱20,000.00.²⁷ As such, the OCA recommended a penalty of fine in the amount of ₱11,000.00.

This notwithstanding, the Court deems it proper to mitigate the penalty by lowering the fine to ₱9,000.00, in view of humanitarian considerations. Among others, respondent has asserted that his health condition (*i.e.*, being a paraplegic), direly affected the performance of his work. Further, as per existing case law, 'humanitarian considerations' may include remorse and acknowledgment of guilt,²⁸ which respondent has expressed in the case at bar. Thus, a fine in the amount of ₱9,000.00 is reasonable to be imposed.

²³ 734 Phil. 559, 566 (2014).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ See *Atty. Esturas v. Judge Lu*, A.M. No. RTJ-11-2281, September 16, 2019.

²⁶ See A.M. No. 18-01-05-SC, promulgated on October 2, 2018.

²⁷ Pursuant to A.M. No. 21-03-17-SC, the fine provided in Section 25, paragraph B of Rule 140 of the Revised Rules of Court is increased to 'not less than ₱35,000.00 but not exceeding ₱100,000.00.'

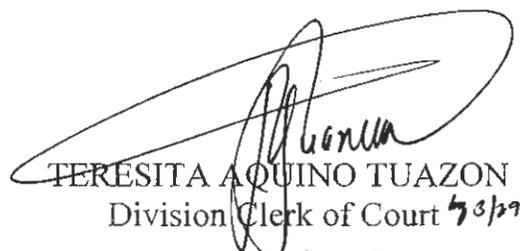
²⁸ (See *Cucho v. Nuya*, A.M. No. RTJ-19-2564, December 10, 2019; *Mahinay v. Daomilas, Jr.*, 833 Phil.

February 28, 2022

WHEREFORE, the Court finds respondent Presiding Judge Manuel B. Sta. Cruz, Jr. of the Regional Trial Court of Quezon City, Branch 226 **GUILTY** of Gross Inefficiency and Delay in the Administration of Justice, and is thus meted with a **FINE** in the amount of **₱9,000.00**, payable within thirty (30) days from receipt of notice, with a **STERN WARNING** that a repetition of the same or similar offense shall be dealt with more severely. The charges of Gross Ignorance of the Law and Evident Bias are hereby **DISMISSED** for lack of merit.

SO ORDERED." (Marquez, *J.*, no part, due to his prior participation as Court Administrator; Dimaampao, *J.*, designated additional member per Raffle dated February 23, 2022.)

By authority of the Court:


TERESITA AQUINO TUAZON
Division Clerk of Court *43/29*
29 MAR 2022

HON. RAUL B. VILLANUEVA (x)
Office of the Court Administrator
HON. DEPUTY COURT ADMINISTRATOR
Jenny Lind Aldecoa-Delorino (x)
Leo T. Madrazo (x)

ASSISTANT COURT ADMINISTRATOR
Hon. Lilian C. Baribal-Co (x)
Hon. Maria Regina Adoracion
Filomena M. Ignacio (x)

Legal Office (x)
Court Management Office (x)
Financial Management Office (x)
Docket & Clearance Division (x)
Office of Administrative Services (x)
Office of the Court Administrator
Supreme Court, Manila

JUDICIAL AND BAR COUNCIL SECRETARIAT (x)
Supreme Court, Manila

JOY ANN O. SESE AND LERMA O. SESE (reg)
Complainants
Bagong Pag-asa Subdivision, Brgy. San Vicente
Apalit, Pampanga

HON. MANUEL B. STA CRUZ, JR. (reg)
Presiding Judge
Regional Trial Court, Branch 226
Quezon City

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE (x)
LIBRARY SERVICES (x)
[For uploading pursuant to A.M. No. 12-7-SC]

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ATTORNEY (x)
OFFICE OF THE REPORTER (x)
PHILIPPINE JUDICIAL ACADEMY (x)
Supreme Court, Manila

Please notify the Court of any change in your address.
AM RTJ-20-2601. 02/28/2022(95)URES

310, 327 (2018); *In Re: Petition for the Dismissal from Service and/or Disbarment of Judge Baltazar R. Dizon*, A.C. No. 3086, May 31, 1989; *Committee on Security and Safety v. Dianco*, 777 Phil. 16, 27 (2016); *OCA v. Judge Chavez*, 815 Phil. 41, 45-46 (2017); *Committee on Security and Safety, Judge Arganosa-Muniego v. Salinas*, 608 Phil. 334, 346-347 (2009); *OCA v. Judge Aguilar*, 666 Phil. 11, 26 (2011); *In Re: Petition for the Dismissal from Service and/or Disbarment of Judge Baltazar R. Dizon*, A.C. No. 3086, May 31, 1989; *Rubin v. Corpus-Caboehan*, 715 Phil. 318, 334 (2013); OCA IPI No. 11-3589-RTJ, July 29, 2013; *Public Assistance and Corruption Prevention Office v. Paumig*, A.M. No. P-18-3882, December 4, 2018, *Committee on Security and Safety, Judge Arganosa-Muniego v. Salinas*, id).