

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. NO. 147272, July 14, 2006]

**CONRADO B. NICART, JR., PETITIONER, VS. HON.
SANDIGANBAYAN, THIRD DIVISION, THE PEOPLE OF THE
PHILIPPINES AND LUZ B. TY, RESPONDENTS.**

D E C I S I O N

GARCIA, J.:

In this petition for certiorari under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court, with prayer for injunctive relief, Conrado B. Nicart, Jr. seeks to annul and set aside the Order dated July 23, 1999^[1] of the Sandiganbayan, Third Division, and its Resolutions dated January 30, 2001^[2] and February 15, 2001,^[3] all issued in its Criminal Case No. 24674.

The antecedent facts and proceedings:

This case started when *Nilcar Mosende, et al.*, on the basis of the findings of the Commission on Audit (COA), filed with the Office of the Ombudsman for the Visayas (OMB-Visayas, hereinafter) a complaint against herein respondent Luz B. Ty (Ty, hereinafter), then municipal treasurer of San Policarpo, Eastern Samar for, among other offenses, misappropriation of over P4.1 Million of public funds. Answering, Ty denied the allegations in the complaint, docketed as OMB-VIS-CRIM-96-1188, and pointed a finger of blame on petitioner Conrado Nicart, Jr., then Mayor of said municipality.

In a bid then to evade liability that might arise from the *Mosende complaint*, Ty, in an *AFFIDAVIT-COMPLAINT*^[4] dated November 6, 1966, charged petitioner with violation of Section 3 (a) and (e) of Republic Act (R.A.) No. 3019, otherwise known as the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act. In her complaint, docketed as OMB-VIS-CRIM-96-1210, Ty stated that she was influenced and induced by the petitioner to violate certain office rules and regulations. Going into specifics, she alleged issuing, upon petitioner's instructions, several PNB checks in favor of third parties, which checks, however, ended being encashed by petitioner's wife, Thelma. She also alleged being induced by the petitioner, his wife and an aide to withdraw huge amounts from the municipal coffers to be charged to the account of petitioner. And according to Ty, petitioner drew funds from her (Ty's) cash advances and used the same for purposes other than what they were appropriated for, adding, in close, that petitioner purchased, in January 1994, a Nissan car using a PNB check issued in her (Ty's) name.

For his part, petitioner tagged Ty's accusatory but false allegations as a case of buck-passing, and then proceeded to file a counter-charge against Ty for malversation and violation of R.A. No. 3019.

Meanwhile, the Special Audit Division, COA-Regional Office-VIII, acting on the request of the OMB-Visayas to look into the veracity of the allegations in Ty's affidavit-complaint and the legality of the transactions mentioned therein, submitted on May 12, 1998 an audit report.^[5] In it, the audit team concluded that cash advances in the total amount of P1,180,000.00 remain unaccounted and unliquidated and that both Ty and petitioner are responsible therefor.

Following the usual preliminary investigation, Graft Investigating Officer Thaddeus Boiser submitted a Resolution dated March 31, 1998 on the consolidated OMB-VIS-CRIM Nos. 96-1188, 96-1210 and 97-0664, recommending the prosecution of petitioner and Ty for Malversation of Public Funds (Art. 217 of the Revised Penal Code). The Deputy Ombudsman for Visayas endorsed the recommendation which then Ombudsman Aniano Desierto approved on June 9, 1998.

An information was accordingly filed with the Sandiganbayan against both petitioner and Ty, docketed as Criminal Case No. 24674. The accusatory portion of the information^[6] reads as follows:

That in or about the month of October 1996 and for sometime prior thereto, at the Municipality of San Policarpo, Province of Eastern Samar, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, above named accused, public officers, being the Municipal Mayor and Municipal Treasurer of the [said] Municipality ... and as such, have in their possession and custody of public funds in the total amount of FOUR MILLION ONE HUNDRED SIX THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY NINE AND 15/100 PESOS (P4,106,489.15), Philippine Currency, for which they are accountable by reason of the duties of their office, taking advantage of their official positions, conniving and confederating together ... with intent to defraud and of gain, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously appropriate, take, misappropriate, embezzle and convert to their own personal use and benefit said public funds in the amount of FOUR MILLION ONE HUNDRED SIX THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY NINE AND 15/100 PESOS (P4,106,489.15) Philippine Currency, and despite demands made upon them to account for said public funds, they have failed to do so, to the damage and prejudice of the government, particularly the Municipality of San Policarpo, Eastern, Samar.

The following events then transpired:

1. After posting the necessary bail bond, petitioner moved for a reinvestigation and the Sandiganbayan allowed him to file the necessary motion.
2. Petitioner moved for and obtained a reinvestigation, but the Office of the Special Prosecutor denied the motion in an Order of March 9, 1999.^[7]
3. On June 30, 1999, petitioner interposed an *Urgent Motion to Defer Proceedings with Motion for Leave to File Petition for Review with the [OMB]*, which motion, however, the Sandiganbayan denied in its first assailed **Order of July 23, 1999**^[8] on the ground that the motion partakes of "[a prohibited] second Motion for Reconsideration [and that] the matters raised therein appear to be evidenciary in character which should be ventilated during the trial."

4. On August 24, 1999, petitioner filed an *Urgent Omnibus Motion*, followed by his *Reply to Comment [of the Special Prosecutor] on the Urgent Omnibus Motion*.

Pursuant to its assailed **Resolution of January 30, 2001**,^[9] the Sandiganbayan denied the petitioner's *Urgent Omnibus Motion* and set a date for his arraignment.

5. A little over two weeks later, the Sandiganbayan, acting on the motion filed by the prosecution pursuant to Sec. 13 of R.A. 3019, issued another **Resolution dated February 15, 2001**,^[10] suspending petitioner (at that time holding the Vice Mayoralty position) from office for ninety days from notice.

Hence, this petition.

In a Resolution of April 2, 2001,^[11] the Court denied petitioner's motion for issuance of temporary restraining order to enjoin the respondent Sandiganbayan from proceeding with his suspension from office *pendente lite* and from holding or taking any further action in Criminal Case No. 24674. This was followed by another Resolution dated June 20, 2001,^[12] denying a reconsideration of the first, prompting the Sandiganbayan, per petitioner's own manifestation, to proceed with his arraignment scheduled on April 17, 2001.^[13]

Given the separate resolutions adverted to dated April 2 and June 20, 2001, the propriety of the preventive suspension of petitioner effected through the assailed Resolution of February 15, 2001 has become a moot issue, it appearing that he has already served his suspension. An issue becomes moot and academic when it ceases to present a justifiable controversy so that a determination thereof would be of no practical use and value.^[14] In such cases, there is no actual substantial relief to which petitioner would be entitled to and which would be negated by the dismissal of the petition.^[15]

This is not say, however, that the assailed suspension resolution of the Sandiganbayan, insofar as it imposed a 90-day preventive suspension instead of the maximum 60 days prescribed by Section 63 of the Local Government Code of 1991 (R.A. No. 7160),^[16] is flawed. Far from it. As may be noted, the anti-graft court ordered the petitioner's suspension on the basis of Section 13 of R.A. No. 3019,^[17] malversation of public funds being an offense involving fraud against government funds and is clearly included among the crimes contemplated under said section. Be that as it may and given the presumptive validity of the information in question, petitioner's urging for the Court to strike down the suspension order cannot be granted. As the Court articulated in *Segovia v. Sandiganbayan*,^[18] citing what then Chief Justice Andres R. Narvasa referred to therein as the "*mass of jurisprudence*":

The Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act implicitly recognizes that the power of preventive suspension lies in the court in which the criminal charge is filed; ...

The provision of suspension *pendent lite* applies to all persons indicted upon a valid information under the Act, whether they be appointive or elective officials It applies to a .. Municipal Mayor, a Governor, a Congressman

It is mandatory for the court to place under preventive suspension a public officer accused before it. xxx

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However, the preventive suspension may not be of indefinite period The Court has thus laid down the rule that preventive suspension may not exceed the maximum period of ninety (90) days in consonance with [PD] No. 807, ... now Section 52 of the Administrative Code of 1987. (Citations omitted; word in bracket added.)

Like the petitioner's challenge against the preventive suspension resolution of the Sandiganbayan, his assault against that court's July 23, 1999^[19] order must likewise be given a short shrift.

As may be recalled, the order adverted to denied, as earlier recited, petitioner's *Urgent Motion to Defer Proceedings with Motion for Leave to Allow Accused to File Petition for Review with the Office of the Ombudsman*. Petitioner sought deferment to provide him time while he makes a bid to secure a review of the Office of the Special Prosecutor's denial of his (petitioner's) motion for reinvestigation. Petitioner would now have this Court strike down the said July 23, 1999 order. The Court will not do so, what with petitioner lacking even the good sense of venturing a reason for his plea.

At any rate, in no sense may the challenged order be stigmatized as capricious, oppressive or wanting in logic as to call for its invalidation by the extraordinary writ of certiorari. As it were, the respondent court predicated its denial of the motion to defer on, inter alia, the fact that the said motion "*partakes of a second Motion for Reconsideration*" suggesting - and correctly so - that the filing thereof is contrary to the Office of the Ombudsman's one-motion rule expressed under the following provision:

SEC. 8. Motion for reconsideration or reinvestigation; Grounds.-Whenever allowable, a motion for reconsideration or reinvestigation may only be entertained if filed within ten (10) days from receipt of the decision

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Only one motion for reconsideration or reinvestigation shall be allowed, and the hearing officer shall resolve the same within^[20]

This brings us to the third and last issue. It relates to petitioner's *Urgent Omnibus Motion* dated August 25, 1990, which the Sandiganbayan denied in its assailed Resolution of January 30, 2001.^[21] Parenthetically, the petitioner did not bother to attach in his petition a copy of the urgent omnibus motion, thus leaving the Court in the dark as to the issues and supporting arguments raised therein. On its face, however, the Resolution of January 30, 2001 only passed upon and resolved, in the affirmative, the issue on the existence of a probable cause for malversation against the petitioner and accordingly denied his plea to quash information.

The determination of a probable cause during a preliminary investigation pertains to