

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. No. 168967, February 12, 2010]

CITY OF ILOILO REPRESENTED BY HON. JERRY P. TREÑAS, CITY MAYOR, PETITIONER, VS. HON. LOLITA CONTRERAS-BESANA, PRESIDING JUDGE, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, BRANCH 32, AND ELPIDIO JAVELLANA, RESPONDENTS.

DECISION

DEL CASTILLO, J.:

It is arbitrary and capricious for the government to initiate expropriation proceedings, seize a person's property, allow the order of expropriation to become final, but then fail to justly compensate the owner for over 25 years. This is government at its most high-handed and irresponsible, and should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. For its failure to properly compensate the landowner, the City of Iloilo is liable for damages.

This Petition for *Certiorari* under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court with a prayer for the issuance of a temporary restraining order seeks to overturn the three Orders issued by Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Iloilo City, Branch 32 on the following dates: December 12, 2003 (the First Assailed Order),^[1] June 15, 2004 (the Second Assailed Order),^[2] and March 9, 2005 (the Third Assailed Order) (the three aforementioned Orders are collectively referred to as the Assailed Orders).^[3]

Factual Antecedents

The essential facts are not in dispute.

On September 18, 1981, petitioner filed a *Complaint*^[4] for eminent domain against private respondent Elpidio T. Javellana (Javellana) and Southern Negros Development Bank, the latter as mortgagee. The complaint sought to expropriate two parcels of land known as Lot Nos. 3497-CC and 3497-DD registered in Javellana's name under Transfer Certificate of Title (TCT) No. T-44894 (the Subject Property) to be used as a school site for Lapaz High School.^[5] Petitioner alleged that the Subject Property was declared for tax purposes in Tax Declaration No. 40080 to have a value of P60.00 per square meter, or a total value of P43,560.00. The case was docketed as Civil Case No. 14052 and raffled to then Court of First Instance of Iloilo, Branch 7.

On December 9, 1981, Javellana filed his *Answer*^[6] where he admitted ownership of the Subject Property but denied the petitioner's avowed public purpose of the sought-for expropriation, since the City of Iloilo already had an existing school site for Lapaz High School. Javellana also claimed that the true fair market value of his property was no less than P220.00 per square meter.^[7]

On May 11, 1982, petitioner filed a *Motion for Issuance of Writ of Possession*, alleging that it had deposited the amount of P40,000.00 with the Philippine National Bank-Iloilo Branch. Petitioner claimed that it was entitled to the immediate possession of the Subject Property, citing Section 1 of Presidential Decree No. 1533,^[8] after it had deposited an amount equivalent to 10% of the amount of compensation. Petitioner attached to its motion a Certification issued by Estefanio C. Libutan, then Officer-in-Charge of the Iloilo City Treasurer's Office, stating that said deposit was made.^[9]

Javellana filed an *Opposition to the Motion for the Issuance of Writ of Possession*^[10] citing the same grounds he raised in his Answer - that the city already had a vast tract of land where its existing school site was located, and the deposit of a mere 10% of the Subject Property's tax valuation was grossly inadequate.

On May 17, 1983, the trial court issued an Order^[11] which granted petitioner's *Motion for Issuance of Writ of Possession* and authorized the petitioner to take immediate possession of the Subject Property. The court ruled:

PREMISES CONSIDERED, the Motion for the Issuance of a Writ of Possession dated May 10, 1982, filed by plaintiff is hereby granted. Plaintiff is hereby allowed to take immediate possession, control and disposition of the properties known as Lot Nos. 3497-CC and 3497-DD x x x.^[12]

Thereafter, a Writ of Possession^[13] was issued in petitioner's favor, and petitioner was able to take physical possession of the properties sometime in the middle of 1985. At no time has Javellana ever denied that the Subject Property was actually used as the site of Lapaz National High School. Aside from the filing by the private respondent of his *Amended Answer* on April 21, 1984,^[14] the expropriation proceedings remained dormant.

Sixteen years later, on April 17, 2000, Javellana filed an *Ex Parte Motion/Manifestation*, where he alleged that when he finally sought to withdraw the P40,000.00 allegedly deposited by the petitioner, he discovered that no such deposit was ever made. In support of this contention, private respondent presented a Certification from the Philippine National Bank stating that no deposit was ever made for the expropriation of the Subject Property.^[15] Private respondent thus demanded his just compensation as well as interest. Attempts at an amicable resolution and a negotiated sale were unsuccessful. It bears emphasis that petitioner could not present any evidence - whether documentary or testimonial - to prove that any payment was actually made to private respondent.

Thereafter, on April 2, 2003, private respondent filed a *Complaint*^[16] against petitioner for Recovery of Possession, Fixing and Recovery of Rental and Damages. The case was docketed as Civil Case No. 03-27571, and raffled to Branch 28 of the Iloilo City Regional Trial Court. Private respondent alleged that since he had not been compensated for the Subject Property, petitioner's possession was illegal, and he was entitled to recovery of possession of his lots. He prayed that petitioner be

ordered to vacate the Subject Property and pay rentals amounting to P15,000.00 per month together with moral, exemplary, and actual damages, as well as attorney's fees.

On May 15, 2003, petitioner filed its Answer,^[17] arguing that Javellana could no longer bring an action for recovery since the Subject Property was already taken for public use. Rather, private respondent could only demand for the payment of just compensation. Petitioner also maintained that the legality or illegality of petitioner's possession of the property should be determined in the eminent domain case and not in a separate action for recovery of possession.

Both parties jointly moved to consolidate the expropriation case (Civil Case No. 14052) and the case for recovery of possession (Civil Case No. 03-27571),^[18] which motion was granted by the trial court in an Order dated August 26, 2003.^[19] On November 14, 2003, a commission was created to determine the just compensation due to Javellana.^[20]

On November 20, 2003, private respondent filed a *Motion/Manifestation* dated November 19, 2003 claiming that before a commission is created, the trial court should first order the condemnation of the property, in accordance with the Rules of Court. Javellana likewise insisted that the fair market value of the Subject Property should be reckoned from the date when the court orders the condemnation of the property, and not the date of actual taking, since petitioner's possession of the property was questionable.^[21] Before petitioner could file its Comment, the RTC issued an Order dated November 21, 2003 denying the Motion.^[22]

Undeterred, Javellana filed on November 25, 2003, an *Omnibus Motion to Declare Null and Void the Order of May 17, 1983 and to Require Plaintiff to Deposit 10% or P254,000.00*. Javellana claimed that the amount is equivalent to the 10% of the fair market value of the Subject Property, as determined by the Iloilo City Appraisal Committee in 2001, at the time when the parties were trying to negotiate a settlement.^[23]

First Assailed Order

On December 12, 2003, the RTC issued the First Assailed Order, which nullified the Order dated May 17, 1983 (concerning the issuance of a writ of possession over the Subject Property). The trial court ruled:

x x x the Order dated May 17, 1983 is hereby declared null and void and the plaintiff [is] hereby ordered to immediately deposit with the PNB the 10% of the just compensation **after the Commission shall have rendered its report and have determined the value of the property not at the time it was condemned but at the time the complaint was filed in court.**^[24] (Emphasis ours)

Second Assailed Order

Neither party sought reconsideration of this Order.^[25] Nonetheless, about six

months later, the RTC issued the Second Assailed Order, which it denominated as an "Amended Order". The Second Assailed Order was identical to the first, except that the reckoning point for just compensation was now the "time this order was issued," which is June 15, 2004.

x x x the Order dated May 17, 1983 is hereby declared null and void and the plaintiff [is] hereby ordered to immediately deposit with the PNB the 10% of the just compensation after the Commission shall have rendered its report and have determined the value of the property not at the time it was condemned but at the time **this order was issued.** (Underscoring in original text)

This time, petitioner filed a *Motion for Reconsideration* claiming that there was no legal basis for the issuance of the Second Assailed Order.^[26] Javellana opposed, arguing that since the May 17, 1983 Order and the Second Assailed Order were interlocutory in character, they were always subject to modification and revision by the court anytime.^[27]

Third Assailed Order

After the parties were able to fully ventilate their respective positions,^[28] the public respondent issued the Third Assailed Order, denying the Motion for Reconsideration, and ruling as follows:

The Order dated June 15, 2004 among other things stated that parties and counsels must be bound by the Commissioner's Report regarding the value of the property **not at the time it was condemned but at the time this order was issued.**

This is true inasmuch as there was no deposit at the PNB and their taking was illegal.

The plaintiff thru [sic] Atty. Laurea alleged that this Court had a change of heart and issued an Amended Order with the same wordings as the order of December 12, 2003 but this time stated not at the time it was condemned but at the time the order was issued. **Naturally, this Court in the interest of justice, can amend its order because there was no deposit by plaintiff.**

The jurisprudence cited by plaintiff that the just compensation must be determined as of the date of the filing of the complaint is true if there was a deposit. Because there was none the filing was not in accordance with law, hence, must be at the time the order was issued.

The allegation of defendant thru [sic] counsel that the orders attacked by plaintiff thru [sic] counsel saying it has become final and executory are interlocutory orders subject to the control of the Judge until final judgment is correct. Furthermore, it is in the interes[t] of justice to correct errors.^[29]

In the meantime, on April 15, 2004, the Commission submitted its Report, providing the following estimates of value, but without making a proper recommendation:^[30]

Reckoning Point	Value per square meter	Fair Market Value	Basis
1981 - at the time the complaint was filed	P110.00/sqm	P79,860.00	based on three or more recorded sales of similar types of land in the vicinity in the same year
1981 - at the time the complaint was filed	P686.81/sqm	P498,625.22	Appraisal by Southern Negros Development Bank based on market value, zonal value, appraised value of other banks, recent selling price of neighboring lots
2002	P3,500.00/sqm	P2,541,000.00	Appraisal by the City Appraisal Committee, Office of the City Assessor
2004	P4,200.00/sqm	PhP3,049,200.00	Private Appraisal Report (Atty. Roberto Cal Catolico dated April 6, 2004)

Hence, the present petition.

Petitioner's Arguments

Petitioner is before us claiming that (1) the trial court gravely abused its discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction in overturning the Order dated May 17, 1983, which was already a final order; and (2) just compensation for the expropriation should be based on the Subject Property's fair market value either at the time of taking or filing of the complaint.

Private Respondent's Arguments

Private respondent filed his Comment on October 3, 2005,^[31] arguing that (1) there was no error of jurisdiction correctible by *certiorari*; and (2) that the Assailed Orders were interlocutory orders that were subject to amendment and nullification at the discretion of the court.

Issues

There are only two questions we need answer, and they are not at all novel. *First*, does an order of expropriation become final? *Second*, what is the correct reckoning point for the determination of just compensation?