

THIRD DIVISION

[G.R. No. 184861, June 30, 2009]

DREAMWORK CONSTRUCTION, INC., PETITIONER, VS. CLEOFE S. JANIOLA AND HON. ARTHUR A. FAMINI, RESPONDENTS.

DECISION

VELASCO JR., J.:

The Case

Petitioner Dreamwork Construction, Inc. seeks the reversal of the August 26, 2008 Decision^[1] in SCA No. 08-0005 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 253 in Las Piñas City. The Decision affirmed the Orders dated October 16, 2007^[2] and March 12, 2008^[3] in Criminal Case Nos. 55554-61 issued by the Metropolitan Trial Court (MTC), Branch 79 in Las Piñas City.

The Facts

On October 18, 2004, petitioner, through its President, Roberto S. Concepcion, and Vice-President for Finance and Marketing, Normandy P. Amora, filed a Complaint Affidavit dated October 5, 2004^[4] for violation of *Batas Pambansa Bilang 22* (BP 22) against private respondent Cleofe S. Janiola with the Office of the City Prosecutor of Las Piñas City. The case was docketed as I.S. No. 04-2526-33. Correspondingly, petitioner filed a criminal information for violation of BP 22 against private respondent with the MTC on February 2, 2005 docketed as Criminal Case Nos. 55554-61, entitled *People of the Philippines v. Cleofe S. Janiola*.

On September 20, 2006, private respondent, joined by her husband, instituted a civil complaint against petitioner by filing a Complaint dated August 2006^[5] for the rescission of an alleged construction agreement between the parties, as well as for damages. The case was filed with the RTC, Branch 197 in Las Piñas City and docketed as Civil Case No. LP-06-0197. Notably, the checks, subject of the criminal cases before the MTC, were issued in consideration of the construction agreement.

Thereafter, on July 25, 2007, private respondent filed a Motion to Suspend Proceedings dated July 24, 2007^[6] in Criminal Case Nos. 55554-61, alleging that the civil and criminal cases involved facts and issues similar or intimately related such that in the resolution of the issues in the civil case, the guilt or innocence of the accused would necessarily be determined. In other words, private respondent claimed that the civil case posed a prejudicial question as against the criminal cases.

Petitioner opposed the suspension of the proceedings in the criminal cases in an undated Comment/Opposition to Accused's Motion to Suspend Proceedings based on Prejudicial Question^[7] on the grounds that: (1) there is no prejudicial question in

this case as the rescission of the contract upon which the bouncing checks were issued is a separate and distinct issue from the issue of whether private respondent violated BP 22; and (2) Section 7, Rule 111 of the Rules of Court states that one of the elements of a prejudicial question is that "the **previously** instituted civil action involves an issue similar or intimately related to the issue raised in the **subsequent** criminal action"; thus, this element is missing in this case, the criminal case having preceded the civil case.

Later, the MTC issued its Order dated October 16, 2007, granting the Motion to Suspend Proceedings, and reasoned that:

Should the trial court declare the rescission of contract and the nullification of the checks issued as the same are without consideration, then the instant criminal cases for alleged violation of BP 22 must be dismissed. The belated filing of the civil case by the herein accused did not detract from the correctness of her cause, since a motion for suspension of a criminal action may be filed at any time before the prosecution rests (Section 6, Rule 111, Revised Rules of Court).^[8]

In an Order dated March 12, 2008,^[9] the MTC denied petitioner's Motion for Reconsideration dated November 29, 2007.

Petitioner appealed the Orders to the RTC with a Petition dated May 13, 2008. Thereafter, the RTC issued the assailed decision dated August 26, 2008, denying the petition. On the issue of the existence of a prejudicial question, the RTC ruled:

Additionally, it must be stressed that the requirement of a "previously" filed civil case is intended merely to obviate delays in the conduct of the criminal proceedings. Incidentally, no clear evidence of any intent to delay by private respondent was shown. The criminal proceedings are still in their initial stages when the civil action was instituted. And, the fact that the civil action was filed after the criminal action was instituted does not render the issues in the civil action any less prejudicial in character.
^[10]

Hence, we have this petition under Rule 45.

The Issue

WHETHER OR NOT THE COURT A QUO SERIOUSLY ERRED IN NOT PERCEIVING GRAVE ABUSE OF DISCRETION ON THE PART OF THE INFERIOR COURT, WHEN THE LATTER RULED TO SUSPEND PROCEEDINGS IN CRIM. CASE NOS. 55554-61 ON THE BASIS OF "PREJUDICIAL QUESTION" IN CIVIL CASE NO. LP-06-0197.^[11]

The Court's Ruling

This petition must be granted.

The Civil Action Must Precede the Filing of the Criminal Action for a Prejudicial Question to Exist

Under the 1985 Rules on Criminal Procedure, as amended by Supreme Court

Resolutions dated June 17, 1988 and July 7, 1988, the elements of a prejudicial question are contained in Rule 111, Sec. 5, which states:

SEC. 5. *Elements of prejudicial question.* -- The two (2) essential elements of a prejudicial question are: (a) the civil action involves an issue similar or intimately related to the issue raised in the criminal action; and (b) the resolution of such issue determines whether or not the criminal action may proceed.

Thus, the Court has held in numerous cases^[12] that the elements of a prejudicial question, as stated in the above-quoted provision and in *Beltran v. People*,^[13] are:

The rationale behind the principle of prejudicial question is to avoid two conflicting decisions. It has two essential elements: (a) the civil action involves an issue similar or intimately related to the issue raised in the criminal action; and (b) the resolution of such issue determines whether or not the criminal action may proceed.

On December 1, 2000, the 2000 Rules on Criminal Procedure, however, became effective and the above provision was amended by Sec. 7 of Rule 111, which applies here and now provides:

SEC. 7. Elements of prejudicial question.--The elements of a prejudicial question are: (a) the **previously instituted civil action** involves an issue similar or intimately related to the issue raised in the **subsequent** criminal action, and (b) the resolution of such issue determines whether or not the criminal action may proceed. (Emphasis supplied.)

Petitioner interprets Sec. 7(a) to mean that in order for a civil case to create a prejudicial question and, thus, suspend a criminal case, it must first be established that the civil case was filed previous to the filing of the criminal case. This, petitioner argues, is specifically to guard against the situation wherein a party would belatedly file a civil action that is related to a pending criminal action in order to delay the proceedings in the latter.

On the other hand, private respondent cites Article 36 of the Civil Code which provides:

Art. 36. Pre-judicial questions which must be decided **before any criminal prosecution may be instituted or may proceed**, shall be governed by rules of court which the Supreme Court shall promulgate and which shall not be in conflict with the provisions of this Code. (Emphasis supplied.)

Private respondent argues that the phrase "before any criminal prosecution may be instituted or may proceed" must be interpreted to mean that a prejudicial question exists when the civil action is filed either before the institution of the criminal action or during the pendency of the criminal action. Private respondent concludes that there is an apparent conflict in the provisions of the Rules of Court and the Civil Code in that the latter considers a civil case to have presented a prejudicial question even if the criminal case preceded the filing of the civil case.

We cannot agree with private respondent.

First off, it is a basic precept in statutory construction that a "change in phraseology by amendment of a provision of law indicates a legislative intent to change the meaning of the provision from that it originally had."^[14] In the instant case, the phrase, "previously instituted," was inserted to qualify the nature of the civil action involved in a prejudicial question in relation to the criminal action. This interpretation is further buttressed by the insertion of "subsequent" directly before the term criminal action. There is no other logical explanation for the amendments except to qualify the relationship of the civil and criminal actions, that the civil action must precede the criminal action.

Thus, this Court ruled in *Torres v. Garchitorena*^[15] that:

Even if we ignored petitioners' procedural lapse and resolved their petition on the merits, we hold that Sandiganbayan did not abuse its discretion amounting to excess or lack of jurisdiction in denying their omnibus motion for the suspension of the proceedings pending final judgment in Civil Case No. 7160. Section 6, Rule III of the Rules of Criminal Procedure, as amended, reads:

Sec. 6. Suspension by reason of prejudicial question. - A petition for suspension of the criminal action based upon the pendency of a prejudicial question in a civil action may be filed in the office of the prosecutor or the court conducting the preliminary investigation. When the criminal action has been filed in court for trial, the petition to suspend shall be filed in the same criminal action at any time before the prosecution rests.

Sec. 7. Elements of prejudicial question. - The elements of a prejudicial question are: (a) the previously instituted civil action involves an issue similar or intimately related to the issue raised in the subsequent criminal action, and (b) the resolution of such issue determines whether or not the criminal action may proceed.

Under the amendment, a prejudicial question is understood in law as that which must precede the criminal action and which requires a decision before a final judgment can be rendered in the criminal action with which said question is closely connected. The civil action must be instituted prior to the institution of the criminal action. In this case, the Information was filed with the Sandiganbayan ahead of the complaint in Civil Case No. 7160 filed by the State with the RTC in Civil Case No. 7160. Thus, no prejudicial question exists. (Emphasis supplied.)

Additionally, it is a principle in statutory construction that "a statute should be construed not only to be consistent with itself but also to harmonize with other laws on the same subject matter, as to form a complete, coherent and intelligible system."^[16] This principle is consistent with the maxim, *interpretare et concordare leges legibus est optimus interpretandi modus* or every statute must be so construed and harmonized with other statutes as to form a uniform system of jurisprudence.^[17]