

FIRST DIVISION

[G.R. No. 168787, September 03, 2008]

DEPARTMENT OF AGRARIAN REFORM, REPRESENTED BY
PROVINCIAL AGRARIAN REFORM OFFICER STEPHEN M.
LEONIDAS, PETITIONER, VS. POLO COCONUT PLANTATION CO.,
INC., FLORENCIA D. REMOLLO, NOLI C. ALCANTARA,^[1] ZOSIMO
BARBA, ROBERT B. BAJANA, EMETERIO V. TAG-AT, JUVENAL T.
MENDEZ,^[2] SHIELA R. REYES, JONITA M. CADALLO, PRISCO P.
BACO, BENJAMIN C. DAYAP, ANTONIO DEDELES,^[3] NARCISO D.
DIAZ, JOVENIANO REYES,^[4] RODOLFO C. SALVA, AVELINO C.
BAJANA, PRAXEDES BAJANA, ALEJANDRO T. GIMOL, EMELINA B.
SEDIGO^[5] AND HERMINIGILDO VILLAFLORES, RESPONDENTS.

G.R. NO. 169271

MARTINA Q. ABARCA, TOLENTINA E. ABLAY, CONCHITA M. AC-
AC, JOSEPHINA S. AC-AC, LORETA C. AC-AC, CARIDAD Q.
AGUILAR, DIOSDADO A. AGUILAR, ROMULO S. AGUILAR,
SHERLITA T. AGUILAR, WILFREDO T. ALCANTARA, ANACLETO B.
ALFORQUE, RICARDO P. BACO, RODRIGO P. BACO, SR., DARIO B.
BAJANA, SR., DEMETRIO F. BALBUENA, GREGORIA R. BARBA,
TOMAS T. BARBA, WILFREDO R. BARBA, VIVIAN F. BAROT,
DOMINGO O. BAROY, ARTURO A. BORROMEO, FEDENCIA R.
BORROMEO, JUANITA P. CABIL, SALVADOR A. CABORNAY,
SEVERINO M. CABUG-OS, AUREA M. CALDA, BALTAZAR R.
CATALOÑA, DANILOO B. CURATO, ARNULFO B. DAEL,
DEMOCRITO B. DAGODOG, GENARO C. DURAN, JOSEPHINE M.
ELLEMA, ALBINA R. ELMAGA, ENRIQUE R. ELMAGA, EDWIN L.
ELUMIR, TOMAS M. GABIHAN, ALBERTO A. GASO, PEDRO R.
GASO, VISITACION S. GASO, ERLINDA S. GAZO, ANDRES M.
GENEL, DIOSCOR M. GENEL, ANGEL R. GOMEZ, LORENZO S.
GOMEZ, SANTIAGO T. GOMEZ, SILANDO Q. GOMEZ, CONSORCIA
G. GUEVARRA, FREDESWINDA M. GUMA, CELODONIA A.
GUZMAN, HERCULANO B. GUZMAN, JR., CESAR Q. HAROY, SR.,
EDDIE Q. HAROY, ROMEO E. INOFERIO, GENARA R. JUANO,
GEVINO B. JUANO, SR., ROGELIA B. JUANO, ROSALITA G.
JUANO, DIOGRACIAS R. LARAZAN, RELINA H. LARENA, JOSE G.
MAGALSO, INOCENCIA G. MALCO, LUCENA B. MALTO, SANTOS S.
MALTAO, ELINA T. MARIMAT, RAMON C. MARIMAT, MERCY B.
MARO, RUTHELMA D. MARO, CHARITA S. MATEO, ALMA D.
MEDINA, ABUNDIO M. MENDEZ, RENOLD S. MINDEZ, ALBERTO B.
MIRA, GAUDENCIA S. MIRA, CRESTITA D. MONTAÑA, DIONISIA
T. MONTAÑA, LORETO R. NAPAO, ALICIA P. NILLAS, ESPERANZA
M. OMATANG, JR., FELICISIMA M. ORACION, JOEL M. ORACION,
PATROCINIO T. PAO, LOURDES T. PARTOSA, FABIAN S. PIÑERO,

FELIX R. PUBLICO, MARIBELLE B. PUBLICO, CARMELITA M. QUILARIO, ENRIQUE R. QUILARIO, MANOLITA M. QUILARIO, MIGUEL S. QUILERIO, LEONILA J. QUINQUILLERIA, DELTA M. RAMIREZ, ELIAS O. RAMOS, CONSOLACION T. REAL, ERLINDA I. REGALA, DOMINGA M. REMAN, EUGENIO O. REMAN, PEPITA R. REMAN, RODNEY D. REMAN, RONNIE O. REMAN, SR., DOMINADOR P. REMPOJO, EUTQUIO T. REMPOJO, ROSITA C. REMPOJO, CAROLINA T. REYES, DIONISIA M. REYES, EUGENIA B. REYES, LORETA D. REYES, MARIO S. REYES, LAUREANO C. RIVERA, PETER C. RIVERA, EVANGELINE Q. RODRIGUEZ, RICARDO R. RODRIGUEZ, PATROCINIO I. SABIHON, FELIPE G. SAGA, ANESIA D. SALIN, FLAVIANO T. SALIN, JR., WENEFREDO T. SALIN, VIRGILIO B. SALOMA, ESTELA S. SALVA, GEORGE R. SALVA, TEOFISTA R. SALVA, JOSEPHINE T. SEDIGO, MICHAEL P. SEGISMAR, SR., JOSEPH S. SEVILLA, MARISSA H. SIENES, MA. GINA M. SILVA, ARTURO T. SOLITANA, MARILYN M. TABORA, GABINO G. TEMBLOR, REYNALDO Q. TEMBLOR, ELSA A. TEVES, LEONORA D. TORCO, GREGORIA O. TOROY, ANDRES P. TORRES, HILARIO P. TORRES, LEONARDO G. TORRES, MANOLITA T. TORRES, GENEROSO I. TORRES, LEONARDO F. TUBAGA, AGRIPINO P. TURCO, FLORDELICO S. VERBO, OLYMPIA T. YORONG AND ROSENDA C. ZERNA, PETITIONERS, VS. POLO COCONUT PLANTATION CO., INC., FLORENCIA D. REMOLLO, NOLE C. ALCANTARA, ZOSIMO BARBA, ROBERT B. BAJANA,^[6] EMETERIO V. TAG-AT, JUVENAL T. MENDEZ, SHIELA R. REYES, JONITA M. CADALLO, PRISCO P. BACO, BENJAMIN C. DAYAP, ANTONIO DEDELES, NARCISO D. DIAZ, JOVENIANO REYES, RODOLFO C. SALVA, AVELINO C. BAJANA, PRAXEDES BAJANA, ALEJANDRO T. GIMOL, MELINA B. SEDIGO AND HERMINIGILDO VILLAFLORES, RESPONDENTS.

D E C I S I O N

CORONA, J.:

In the late 1990s, respondent Polo Coconut Plantation Co., Inc. (PCPCI) sought to convert 280 hectares of its Polo Coconut Plantation^[7] (Polo estate) in Tanjay, Negros Oriental into a special economic zone (ecozone) under the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA). On December 19, 1998, PEZA issued Resolution No. 98-320 favorably recommending the conversion of the Polo estate into an ecozone^[8] subject to certain terms and conditions including the submission of "all government clearances, endorsements and documents required under Rule IV, Section 3 of the Rules and Regulations to Implement Republic Act (RA) 7916."

The following year, PCPCI applied for the reclassification of its agricultural lands into mixed residential, commercial and industrial lands with the municipal government of Tanjay. After conducting the prescribed hearing, the *Sangguniang Bayan* of Tanjay adopted Resolution No. 344 granting PCPCI's application on November 3, 1999.

When Tanjay became a city, its *Sangguniang Panglungsod* adopted Resolution No. 16 approving Tanjay's Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Zoning Ordinance where PCPCI's real properties, including the Polo estate, were reclassified as mixed

residential, commercial and industrial lands.^[9]

Sometime in 2003, petitioner Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), through Provincial Agrarian Reform Officer Stephen M. Leonidas, notified PCPCI that 394.9020 hectares of the Polo estate had been placed under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP)^[10] and would be acquired by the government.

Thereafter, Leonidas requested the Registrar of Deeds of Negros Oriental to cancel PCPCI's certificate of title and to issue a new one in the name of the Republic of the Philippines. He likewise asked Region VII Regional Agrarian Reform Adjudicator Arnold C. Arrieta to determine the just compensation due to PCPCI.^[11]

On January 29, 2004, a new certificate of title was issued in the name of the Republic of the Philippines.^[12] The next day, that title was cancelled and another was issued in the name of petitioners in G.R. No. 169271 (petitioners-beneficiaries).^[13]

Meanwhile, on March 11, 2004, Arrieta approved the land valuation (P85,491,784.60)^[14] of the Land Bank of the Philippines for the Polo estate. PCPCI moved for reconsideration but it was denied in an order dated March 30, 2004.

On July 16, 2004, Leonidas informed PCPCI that a relocation survey of the Polo estate would be conducted. PCPCI moved for the suspension of the survey but it was denied.^[15]

Aggrieved, PCPCI filed a petition for certiorari^[16] in the Court of Appeals (CA) asserting that the DAR acted with grave abuse of discretion in placing the Polo estate under the CARP. It argued that the Polo estate should not be subjected to the CARP because Resolution No. 16 had already designated it as mixed residential, commercial and industrial land. Moreover, petitioners-beneficiaries were not qualified to receive land under the CARP.

In its February 16, 2005 decision, the CA found that the Polo estate was no longer agricultural land when the DAR placed it under the CARP in view of Resolution No. 16. Furthermore, petitioners-beneficiaries were not qualified beneficiaries as they were not tenants of PCPCI. Thus:

WHEREFORE, in view of the foregoing premises, judgment is hereby rendered by us **DECLARING** as **NOT VALID** the acts of the [DAR] of subjecting PCPCI's [Polo estate] to the coverage of the CARP, of canceling and causing the cancellation of [PCPCI's] Transfer Certificate of Title No. T-2304 covering such land, of issuing or causing the issuance of Transfer Certificate of Title No. T-36318 for this land in the name of the Republic of the Philippines by way of transfer to it, of issuing or causing the issuance of Transfer Certificate of Title No. T-802 for the said land in the names of [petitioner-beneficiaries] in the case at bench by way of award of them of such land as purported farm beneficiaries and of doing other things with the end in view of subjecting [the Polo estate] to CARP coverage, **SETTING ASIDE** and **ENJOINING** such acts and the consequence thereof, **ORDERING** the [petitioner-beneficiaries] to vacate the premises of [the Polo estate] if they had entered such premises, and

ORDERING the respondent Register of Deeds of Negros Oriental to cancel Transfer Certificate of Title Nos. T-36318 and T-802 and to reinstate Transfer Certificate of Title No. T-2304 in the name of petitioner PCPCI.

SO ORDERED.^[17]

Both the DAR and petitioners-beneficiaries moved for reconsideration but they were denied.^[18] Hence, this recourse.

The DAR asserts that the reclassification of the Polo estate under Resolution No. 16 as mixed residential, commercial and industrial land did not place it beyond the reach of the CARP. Petitioners-beneficiaries, on the other hand, insist that they were qualified beneficiaries. While they were neither farmers nor regular farmworkers of PCPCI, they were either seasonal or other farmworkers.

There is merit in these petitions.

NON-EXHAUSTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE REMEDIES

Recourse to court action will not prosper until all remedies have been exhausted at the administrative level.^[19]

Section 3, Rule II of the 2003 DARAB Rules of Procedure (DARAB Rules) provides:

Section 3. Agrarian Law Implementation Cases. The Adjudicator or Board shall have no jurisdiction over matters involving the implementation of RA 6657 otherwise known as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL) of 1988 and other related agrarian laws enunciated by pertinent rules and administrative orders, which shall be under the **exclusive prerogative of and cognizable by the Office of the Secretary of the DAR** in accordance with his issuances to wit:

3.1. Classification and identification of landholdings for coverage under the agrarian reform program and the initial issuance of [certificates of land ownership award] and [emancipation patents], including protests or oppositions thereto and petitioners for lifting of such coverage;

3.2. Classification, identification, inclusion, exclusion, qualification or disqualification of potential/actual farmer/beneficiaries; (emphasis supplied)

x x x x x x x x x

Protests regarding the implementation of the CARP fall under the exclusive jurisdiction of the DAR Secretary. He determines whether a tract of land is covered by or exempt from CARP.^[20] Likewise, questions regarding the eligibility of CARP beneficiaries must be addressed to him. The DAR Secretary decides to whom lands placed under the CARP shall be distributed.^[21]

Before PCPCI filed its petition for certiorari in the CA, it did not file a protest or

opposition questioning the propriety of subjecting the Polo estate to the CARP. Neither did it assail the eligibility of petitioners-beneficiaries before the DAR Secretary. There were available administrative remedies under the DARAB Rules but PCPCI did not avail of them.

Moreover, a special civil action for certiorari under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court can be availed of only in the absence of an appeal or any plain, speedy and adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law.^[22] Here, recourse to the DAR Secretary was the plain, speedy and adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law contemplated by Rule 65.

NON-CONVERSION TO MIXED RESIDENTIAL, COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL LAND

In *Ros v. DAR*,^[23] we held that reclassified agricultural lands must undergo the process of conversion in the DAR^[24] before they may be used for other purposes.^[25] Since the DAR never approved the conversion of the Polo estate from agricultural to another use, the land was never placed beyond the scope of the CARP.

The approval of the DAR for the conversion of agricultural land into an industrial estate is a condition precedent for its conversion into an ecozone.^[26] A proposed ecozone cannot be considered for Presidential Proclamation unless the landowner first submits to PEZA a land use conversion clearance certificate from the DAR.^[27] This PCPCI failed to do.

PEZA Resolution No. 98-320 expressly provides:

Resolved, that the application of [PCPCI] for (1) declaration of the 280-hectare property in Brgy. Polo, Municipality of Tanjay, Province of Negros Oriental as a Special Economic Zone, subject to Presidential Proclamation, henceforth to be known as **POLO ECOCITY-SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE** and (2) registration as the Developer/Owner of the said ECOZONE is hereby **APPROVED** subject to the following terms and conditions:

x x x x x x x x x

2. Prior to PEZA's endorsement of the subject area to the President for proclamation as an ECOZONE, the PCPCI shall submit all government clearances, endorsements and documents required under Rule IV, Section 3 of the [Rules and Regulations to Implement RA 7916];

x x x x x x x x x

This condition proves that the favorable recommendation of PEZA did not *ipso facto* change the nature of the Polo estate. The property remained as agricultural land and, for this reason, was still subject to the CARP.

In fact, Resolution No. 16 did not exempt PCPCI's agricultural lands (including the