

THIRD DIVISION

[A.M. NO. RTJ-05-1919, June 27, 2006]

NESTOR F. DANTES, COMPLAINANT, VS. JUDGE RAMON S. CAGUIOA, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, BRANCH 74, OLONGAPO CITY, RESPONDENT.

DECISION

CARPIO-MORALES, J.:

Judge Ramon S. Caguioa (respondent) is being administratively faulted, in a complaint^[1] filed by Atty. Nestor F. Dantes (complainant), for serious or gross misconduct.

The antecedents of the case are as follows:

Eduardo R. Tulfo and Wilma Galapin, through their counsel-herein complainant, filed a complaint for declaration of nullity of a deed of sale with right to repurchase against Norma Yap Ong and Elanio Ong before the Olongapo City Regional Trial Court (RTC). The complaint, docketed as Civil Case No. 96-0-2001, was raffled to Branch 74 of the RTC. ^[2]

By Order^[3] dated May 22, 2001, Judge Philbert I. Iturralde, then acting Presiding Judge of Branch 74 of the Olongapo RTC, dismissed the complaint, it appearing that the validity of the questioned sale had already been passed upon by Branch 72 in Civil Case No. 14-0-94.^[4] In the same order, the trial court, finding the plaintiffs and their counsel-herein complainant guilty of direct contempt for willful and deliberate forum shopping,^[5] imposed a fine of P5,000 against the plaintiffs and a fine of the same amount against their counsel.

On May 28, 2001, the plaintiffs filed a Motion for Reconsideration of the trial court's May 22, 2001 Order^[6] upon the grounds that the issues which Civil Case No. 14-0-94 and Civil Case No. 96-0-2001 raised are dissimilar and that their and their counsel's being declared guilty of contempt was bereft of factual, legal and jurisdictional basis. To the motion, the defendants filed an Opposition on June 5, 2001.^[7]

In the meantime, respondent was appointed as Presiding Judge of Branch 74 and took over the pending incident in Civil Case No. 96-0-2001. ^[8]

By Order dated September 19, 2001, the plaintiffs' Motion for Reconsideration was deemed submitted for resolution.^[9]

The motion was, with respect to the reconsideration of the dismissal of the complaint on the ground of *res judicata*, denied by respondent for lack of merit, by

Order dated June 18, 2002, upon a finding that the issues in both civil cases were "substantially similar."^[10] Respecting Judge's Iturralde's finding that the plaintiffs and their counsel violated the rules on forum shopping, respondent set it aside, he holding that there was "no sufficient basis to impose the same considering the lack of independent and convincing evidence (other than the wordings contained in the verification and certification) that would show deliberate intent to mislead the Court."^[11]

The plaintiffs, through their counsel-herein complainant, filed a Motion for Clarification^[12] of the Order of June 18, 2002, followed by the submission of an Addendum/Supplement to Plaintiffs Motion to Convert/Reconsider and Inhibition.^[13]

By Order of October 9, 2002, respondent directed the plaintiffs and complainant to show cause and explain in writing why "they should not be cited in contempt of Court for using disrespectful language in their pleadings that constitutes an affront to the dignity of the Court."^[14]

On October 16, 2002, complainant filed a Motion for respondent to specify/particularize the "disrespectful language" used in the pleadings he submitted.^[15]

On October 18, 2002, respondent issued an Order denying the Motion to specify/particularize for being a sham pleading and ordering the arrest of complainant.^[16] The pertinent portion of the Order reads:

The filing of said motion [to specify/particularize] is a clear indication that counsel does not believe and will not admit that he used disrespectful language against the court. That being so and in order to preserve and uphold its dignity, the court cites Atty. Nestor F. Dantes in direct contempt of court. He is sentenced to suffer the penalty of five (5) days imprisonment and pay a fine in the amount of Php 2,000.00. (Underscoring supplied)^[17]

On even date, around 3:30 in the afternoon, a police officer arrested complainant at his law office. On complainant's request, the police officer brought him to the chambers of respondent where he verbally asked the latter to allow him to post a bond for his provisional liberty and to enable him to prepare the necessary documents needed to elevate the matter to the Court of Appeals on a petition for certiorari/prohibition.^[18]

Respondent denied the request of complainant who was thereafter brought to the detention center of Police Station 1, Olongapo City where he stayed until his release four days later.^[19]

On December 2, 2002, complainant filed the present administrative case against respondent for serious misconduct, positing the following arguments:

- A. Direct contempt proceedings are akin to criminal cases, and the substantial rights of petitioner (as an alleged contemner) must remain inviolate;

B. The respondent judge deprived petitioner his right to due process of law, more specifically, his right to be heard and present his defense because:

B-1. The contempt order was issued by the respondent judge without any hearing and, therefore, prevented petitioner from putting up his defense;

B-2. The respondent judge took back the three day (3) period he originally gave the petitioner in his previous order of October 9, 2002 directing him to explain in writing why he should not be cited in contempt;

B-3. The contempt order and the warrant of arrest were issued simultaneously by the respondent judge on the same day causing the immediate arrest of petitioner also on same day;

C. The motion to specify/particularize – which angered the respondent judge and triggered the issuance of the contempt order – is nothing more than a motion to be informed of what petitioner must explain in writing;

D. The respondent judge cannot presume and speculate that the filing of the motion to specify/particularize is a clear indication that petitioner does not believe and will not admit that he used disrespectful language in various pleadings;

E. The respondent judge issued the contempt order out of vindictiveness and retaliation, not preservation.^[20]

In his Comment, respondent explains that complainant in his motion for clarification used intemperate and contumacious language in describing his Order dated June 18, 2003, which language cannot under any circumstance be justified in light of his simple and clear orders.^[21]

Portions of the alleged contemptuous motion for clarification read:

It is respectfully submitted that the Order sought to be clarified maybe best described as a legal legerdemain and or a sophistry.^[22]

x x x

This stares at the very face of the Hon. Court and it is submitted that a disregard of the same would constitute gross negligence [or even malice].^[23]

x x x

Certainly, with all due respect, the grandiose (though lackadaisical, it is respectfully submitted in all candor) declaration in the order that:

“This Court is not convinced.”

is utterly short of the cited requirement. In fact, it is submitted, it is much too cavalier to acquire a valid judicial statement.^[24]

x x x

In the context of the ground cited in defendant's Motion to Dismiss, this is in all candor and at the risk of being cited in contempt, is pure chicanery, or at least ignorance of Rule 16, Sec. 1 and the ground cited as already noted earlier, is res judicata, but the order cavalierly did not find it necessary anymore to rule on the same. [25]

x x x

The statement in the order that Other Case No. 14-0-94 and this case to be "substantially similar," it is submitted in all candor is not only ambivalent and has a tinge of sophistry. x x x [26]

A careful reading of the allegations/claims of the Complaint in this case and a like reading of the pleading in the Other Case will readily demonstrate that their in verisimilitude is patent, substantial and cannot be brushed aside by the order's sophistry and legal legerdemain. [27]

x x x

It is respectfully submitted that "The Without Prejudice Order of Dismissal" is absurd and contradicts itself. [28]

x x x (Underscoring supplied)

Respondent further explains: While in direct contempt, no notice and hearing is required, he nevertheless issued a "show-cause" order to give complainant a chance to explain his use of foul and intemperate language. [29] Complainant, however, threw back the order at him and required the court to first specify/particularize the disrespectful language considered contemptuous which "effectively mock[ed] the court". [30]

Respondent adds that complainant very well knew that the language he used in his pleadings was disrespectful as he admitted on page 4 of his Motion for Clarification, to wit:

The penultimate paragraph of the Order of June 18, 2002 which is herein sought to be clarified states: "This case is Dismissed without Prejudice." In the context of the ground cited in defendant's Motion to Dismiss, this is in all candor and at the risk of being cited in contempt, is pure chicanery, or at least ignorance of Rule 16, Sec. 1 and the ground cited as already noted earlier, is res judicata, but the order cavalierly did not find it necessary anymore to rule on the same. x x x (Underscoring supplied) [31]

Finally, respondent explains that the citation for contempt was never issued to retaliate, nor was it motivated by any ill will, hostility and vindictiveness, but was resorted to preserve the dignity of the court. [32]

The Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) finds that complainant's use of the