

THIRD DIVISION

[G.R. No. 152564, September 13, 2004]

**EUGENIO BAUTISTA, ROMEO CRUZ AND CARMENCITA B. CRUZ,
PETITIONERS, VS. SUSANA MAG-ISA VDA. DE VILLENA,
RESPONDENT.**

DECISION

PANGANIBAN, J.:

Agrarian laws were enacted to help small farmers uplift their economic status by providing them with a modest standard of living sufficient to meet their needs for food, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities. The law grants them the right to constitute a home lot as their dwelling and subsistence. Because it is intimately connected with the tenancy relationship of the landowner and the agricultural lessee, any dispute regarding its transfer, removal or retention falls within the jurisdiction of the DARAB --the quasi-judicial body specially tasked to hear and adjudicate all agrarian disputes, matters or incidents involved in or related to the implementation of agrarian laws.

The Case

Before us is a Petition for Review^[1] under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court, assailing the May 29, 2001 Decision^[2] and the March 13, 2002 Resolution^[3] of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-GR CV No. 45948. The assailed Decision disposed as follows:

"WHEREFORE, premises considered, the appeal is hereby **GRANTED**. The Decision appealed from is **REVERSED** and **SET ASIDE**. The complaint against [respondent] is ordered **DISMISSED**."^[4]

The challenged Resolution denied reconsideration of the Decision.

The Facts

The CA narrates the facts in this wise:

"The agricultural lot in question, designated as Lot No. 26, is situated at Poblacion, San Rafael, Bulacan, and covered by TCT No. RT-6304. Along with another parcel of land with an area of 2½ hectares, it was originally owned by Maria Lopez Caluag (or "**Caluag**"), who is now deceased. The original tenant-tiller of this agricultural land was the late Aqui[li]no Villena, husband of [respondent], Susana Mag[-I]sa Villena (or "**Susana**"). The tenancy relationship dated back to 1946 and continued even after the demise of Aquilino through his surviving spouse, Susana.

"In 1957, upon the instruction of Caluag, the house of Susana was transferred to the subject lot, because Caluag had given Susana a portion

thereof with an area of 1000 square meters as [home lot] and seedbed. Since then, Susana had been in peaceful possession thereof until 1987 when a case for ejectment was filed against her by [petitioners] Eugenio Bautista, Romeo Cruz and Carmencita B. Cruz x x x.”^[5]

The ejectment case did not prosper. Thus, at the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Bulacan on March 26, 1990, petitioners filed against respondent an action for quieting of title and recovery of possession.^[6] The trial court ruled in favor of petitioners, prompting respondent to appeal to the CA.

Ruling of the Court of Appeals

Reversing the trial court, the appellate court ruled that as tenant of the previous owner of the land, respondent was entitled to a home lot and the right to maintain a house thereon.^[7] It also opined that since the case involved the right to continue and enjoy the home lot, jurisdiction belonged to the Department of Agrarian Reform Adjudication Board (DARAB), not to the trial court.^[8]

Hence, this Petition.^[9]

The Issue

The sole issue raised by petitioners for our consideration is as follows:

“x x x [W]hether or not this case falls under the ambit of the exclusive jurisdiction of the Department of Agrarian Reform Adjudication Board (DARAB) pursuant to Executive Order 129-A.”^[10]

The Court’s Ruling

The Petition has no merit.

Sole Issue: **Jurisdiction of the DARAB**

The doctrine of primary jurisdiction precludes the courts from resolving a controversy over which jurisdiction has initially been lodged with an administrative body of special competence.^[11] For agrarian reform cases, jurisdiction is vested in the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR); more specifically, in the Department of Agrarian Reform Adjudication Board (DARAB).

Executive Order 229^[12] vested the DAR with (1) quasi-judicial powers to determine and adjudicate agrarian reform matters; and (2) jurisdiction over all matters involving the implementation of agrarian reform, except those falling under the exclusive original jurisdiction of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.^[13] This law divested the regional trial courts of their general jurisdiction to try agrarian reform matters.^[14]

Under Republic Act 6657,^[15] the DAR retains jurisdiction over all agrarian reform matters. The pertinent provision reads:

"Section 50. *Quasi-Judicial Powers of the DAR.* —The DAR is hereby vested with the primary jurisdiction to determine and adjudicate agrarian reform matters and shall have exclusive original jurisdiction over all matters involving the implementation of agrarian reform, except those falling under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

"It shall not be bound by technical rules of procedure and evidence but shall proceed to hear and decide all cases, disputes or controversies in a most expeditious manner, employing all reasonable means to ascertain the facts of every case in accordance with justice and equity and the merits of the case. Toward this end, it shall adopt a uniform rule of procedure to achieve a just, expeditious and inexpensive determination of every action or proceeding before it.

"x x x

x x x

x x x

"Notwithstanding an appeal to the Court of Appeals, the decision of the DAR shall be immediately executory."^[16]

In the process of reorganizing and strengthening the DAR, Executive Order No. 129-A^[17] was enacted; it created the DARAB to assume the adjudicatory powers and functions of the Department.^[18] Rule II of the Revised Rules of the DARAB provides as follows:

"Section 1. *Primary And Exclusive Original and Appellate Jurisdiction.* — The board shall have primary and exclusive jurisdiction, both original and appellate, to determine and adjudicate all agrarian disputes involving the implementation of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) under Republic Act no. 6657, Executive Order Nos. 228, 229, and 129-A, Republic Act No. 3844 as amended by Republic Act No. 6389, Presidential Decree No. 27 and other agrarian laws and their implementing rules and regulations. x x x.

"x x x

x x x

x x x."^[19]

Agrarian dispute refers to any controversy relating to tenurial arrangements -- whether leasehold, tenancy, stewardship or otherwise -- over lands devoted to agriculture. Such disputes include those concerning farm workers' associations or representations of persons in negotiating, fixing, maintaining, changing or seeking to arrange terms or conditions of such tenurial arrangements.^[20] Also included is any controversy relating to the terms and conditions of transfer of ownership from landowners to farm workers, tenants and other agrarian reform beneficiaries -- whether the disputants stand in the proximate relation of farm operator and beneficiary, landowner and tenant, or lessor and lessee.^[21]

The Existence of Tenancy

The instant case involves the tenancy rights of respondent against petitioners. Consequently, there exists an agrarian dispute cognizable by the DARAB.

Respondent was a tenant of petitioners' predecessors. Petitioners' own evidence confirmed this fact. The CA keenly observed thus:

1. [Petitioner] **Eugenio Bautista**, who testified on direct examination, thus:

Q. Is there a relationship between your mother-in-law, Maria Lopez Vda. De Caluag and Lorenzo Caluag?

