

FIRST DIVISION

[A.M. No. RTJ-99-1449 (Formerly OCA IPI No 97-350-RTJ), January 18, 2002]

**EDMUNDO & CARMELITA BALDERAMA, COMPLAINANTS, VS.
JUDGE ADOLFO F. ALAGAR, RESPONDENT.**

RESOLUTION

KAPUNAN, J.:

On April 7, 1997, Spouses Edmundo and Carmelita Balderama filed a letter-complaint dated March 21, 1997 against respondent Judge Adolfo Alagar of the Regional Trial Court, San Fernando City, La Union, Branch 66 with the Office of the Court Administrator for partiality and bias and impropriety.^[1]

In their complaint, they alleged that they are the accused in Criminal Case No. 4252, entitled "People of the Philippines vs. Spouses Edmundo and Carmelita Balderama" for Estafa thru Falsification of Public Documents pending before Judge Alagar. In one occasion, Judge Alagar called them together with their lawyer, Atty. Celso Alex M. Laudensorio, Atty. Roman Villalon, private prosecutor and Public Prosecutor Oscar Corpuz for a conference in his chamber. In the presence of the three (3) lawyers, they were forced to enter a plea of "guilty" in said criminal case. And every time there was a hearing of their criminal case, Judge Alagar would reiterate his demand which they refused to accede.

Complainants also charged respondent Judge for impropriety as he was seen fraternizing with the private complainants in the criminal case, Spouses Jamie and Bernarda Ader, who are their neighbors in Barangay Pandan, Bacnotan, La Union.

- 1) On February 20, 1997 at about 8:30 in the morning, they saw Judge Alagar riding in his car with Plate No. ABL-368 and fetched the private complainants to attend the scheduled hearing in his sala. This was repeated on February 26, 1997, and March 5, 1997;
- 2) On March 11, 1997 at 11:30 in the morning, Judge Alagar, riding in an LTO Service Car, visited the private complainants at their residence;
- 3) On March 15, 1997, Judge Alagar and some of his friends attended a party at the residence of the private complainants.

They filed a Motion for Inhibition against respondent Judge Alagar which was denied.

On July 9, 1997, Court Administrator Alfredo L. Benipayo required respondent Judge to comment on the verified complaint.^[2]

In his Comment,^[3] respondent Judge answered that:

- 1) The complainants are also the same accused in Criminal Cases Nos. 3981; 3986 and 4015, entitled "People vs. Carmelita Balderama; "People vs. Edmundo and Carmelita Balderama; and People vs. Carmelita Balderama" respectively, all for "Estafa Thru Falsification of Public Documents" which cases have already been decided, both the accused having pleaded guilty and accordingly, they were convicted of the crimes charged;
- 2) In the above-mentioned three latter cases, the undersigned played an important role in the plea bargaining by convincing the complainants to agree to the plea bargaining for humanitarian reasons xxx; so that with the consent of the complainants therein, I have awarded them a sentence which is within the Probation period, when they could have actually meted higher penalty since there are three cases involved;

xxx

- 3) It is true that the undersigned have advised the accused (complainants herein) to plead guilty, albeit forcefully, but only to help them get another plea bargaining, because to the mind of this Court, if they are found guilty, they would be considered "habitual delinquents" since the Private Prosecutor has manifested that their evidences in the first three decided cases where the same accused pleaded guilty, will be the same evidences to be used in this pending case;

xxx

- 4) The allegations of accused that the undersigned had been going to the residence of private complainants in said cases for so many times as enumerated in their Complaint is pure hearsay because in truth and in fact the undersigned have (sic) not been to the residence of said complainants, but to the seashore of Barangay Pandan, Bacnotan, La Union, which undersigned came to know later (from the instant Complaint) that said place is the residence of both parties in the aforementioned Criminal Cases;

xxx

- 5) If ever my car was used by complainants as a ride in my

coming to San Fernando, I am not personally aware of it; however, upon investigation after receiving the instant Complaint, I found out that my Court Aide/driver has once or twice allowed the complainants, including one or two of their relatives to ride with him while coming back from buying fish in the morning; and that he had been parking my car in front of the complainants' house allegedly because it would be safer there since they could oversee it while he (my driver/Court Aide) is on the seashore waiting for fishermen to dock their boats with their "fish catch" and/or while buying fish in the seashore;

Respondent Judge Alagar, thereby, moved for the dismissal of the instant complaint for lack of merit. Likewise, affidavits executed by Alpenio Q. Fontanilla and Court Aide Oscar D. Bugain were submitted by respondent Judge to bolster his claim of impartiality in dealing with the complainants in connection with the case pending before his sala.

On October 20, 1997, respondent Judge filed an "Addendum to Comment" attaching therein the affidavit of Atty. Celso Alex Laudensorio, former counsel of herein complainants.^[4]

On June 28, 1999, the Court resolved to docket the case as a regular administrative proceedings and to require the parties to manifest whether they were willing to submit the case for decision on the basis of the pleadings filed.^[5] In compliance with the resolution, respondent Judge manifested his intention to argue his case before the Court.^[6]

Acting on the manifestation, the Court referred the instant case to Associate Justice Corona Ibay-Somera of the Court of Appeals for investigation, report and recommendation.^[7]

On January 13, 1999, the Investigating Justice submitted her report with the following findings and recommendation:

In sum, the undersigned Investigator finds public respondent to have acted with impartiality and propriety in dealing with the complainants in Criminal Case No. 4252 but attributes fault in failing to supervise the conduct and behavior of his court employee for the latter's improper use of his vehicle.

In view of the foregoing premises, the undersigned Investigator respectfully recommends that respondent Judge be REMINDED to strictly observe and maintain competence in his bounden duty to supervise his court personnel and to be more circumspect in his actuation bearing in mind that his conduct in and outside the courtroom is under constant observation and scrutiny.^[8]

We adopt the findings of the Investigating Justice.

In resolving the instant administrative case, the Investigating Justice pointed out two (2) issues which are as follows:

I. WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS A REASONABLE GROUND TO BELIEVE THAT THE PROCEEDINGS CONDUCTED BY THE RESPONDENT JUDGE IN CRIMINAL CASE NO. 4252 IS TAINTED WITH PREJUDICE BY HIS ACT OF FORCING THE COMPLAINANTS TO ENTER INTO A PLEA BARGAINING AGREEMENT.

II. WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS A REASONABLE GROUND TO BELIEVE THAT RESPONDENT JUDGE TRANSGRESSED THE HIGH STANDARD OF MORAL ETHICS MANDATED OF MAGISTRATES BY ALLOWING HIMSELF TO BE SEEN AT THE RESIDENCE OF THE PRIVATE COMPLAINANTS.^[9]

Anent the first issue, it is admitted that Judge Alagar indeed tried to convince the Spouses Balderama to plead guilty to the offense charged but with a reason. At the time of the filing of this complaint, the Spouses Balderama had already been previously found guilty by the respondent Judge of "Estafa through Falsification of Public Documents" in Criminal Case Nos. 3981, 3986 and 4015. These cases were all tried before respondent Judge. He explained that he had advised the complainants to plead guilty, albeit forcefully,

xxx [O]nly to help them get another plea bargaining, because to the mind of this Court, if they be found guilty, they would be considered "habitual delinquents" since the Private Prosecutor has manifested that their evidences in the first three (3) decided cases where the same accused pleaded guilty, will be the same evidences to be used in this pending case.^[10]

The probability of another conviction was not all too far-fetched considering the fact that at the time the advice was given, the prosecution had already manifested to the court that the same evidence presented in the earlier cases against them, would again be presented in the pending case before his sala. It was out of compassion that respondent Judge urged the complainants to enter a plea of guilty for their benefit.

It is also important to point out that during these in-chambers sessions with respondent Judge Alagar, counsel of the complainants was also present which very well show that Spouses Balderama were not at all really prejudiced in their rights by virtue of such advice of the respondent Judge. It was proven that during every conference held inside respondent Judge Alagar's chambers, the Spouses Balderrama were always accompanied by their counsel, and the public and private prosecutors, among others. In some cases, it was not only respondent Judge Alagar but the Spouses Balderama's own counsel, as well, who advised them to enter a guilty plea. In such a case, the Spouses Balderama cannot therefore say that they had been forced or intimidated into doing anything against their own will or interest.

The case at bar must be distinguished from other cases as in the case of *Capuno vs. Jaramillo, Jr.*, where this Court cautioned against in-chambers sessions with judges, but only when the other party and their counsel are not present.^[11] In the instant case, respondent Judge had been rather open with the parties as to his advice in entering a plea of guilty. It was not an offer clandestinely made. In the complaint, it was admitted that: