

EN BANC

[G.R. No. 142840, May 07, 2001]

ANTONIO BENGSON III, PETITIONER, VS. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL AND TEODORO C. CRUZ, RESPONDENTS.

DECISION

KAPUNAN, J.:

The citizenship of respondent Teodoro C. Cruz is at issue in this case, in view of the constitutional requirement that "no person shall be a Member of the House of Representatives unless he is a natural-born citizen."^[1]

Respondent Cruz was a natural-born citizen of the Philippines. He was born in San Clemente, Tarlac, on April 27, 1960, of Filipino parents. The fundamental law then applicable was the 1935 Constitution.^[2]

On November 5, 1985, however, respondent Cruz enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and, without the consent of the Republic of the Philippines, took an oath of allegiance to the United States. As a consequence, he lost his Filipino citizenship for under Commonwealth Act No. 63, Section 1(4), a Filipino citizen may lose his citizenship by, among others, "rendering service to or accepting commission in the armed forces of a foreign country." Said provision of law reads:

Section 1. *How citizenship may be lost.* — A Filipino citizen may lose his citizenship in any of the following ways and/or events:

x x x x x x x x x

(4) By rendering services to, or accepting commission in, the armed forces of a foreign country: *Provided*, That the rendering of service to, or the acceptance of such commission in, the armed forces of a foreign country, and the taking of an oath of allegiance incident thereto, with the consent of the Republic of the Philippines, shall not divest a Filipino of his Philippine citizenship if either of the following circumstances is present:

(a) The Republic of the Philippines has a defensive and/or offensive pact of alliance with said foreign country; or

(b) The said foreign country maintains armed forces on Philippine territory with the consent of the Republic of the Philippines: *Provided*, That the Filipino citizen concerned, at the time of rendering said service, or acceptance of said commission, and taking the oath of allegiance incident thereto, states that he does so only in connection with his service to said foreign country; *And provided, finally*, That any Filipino citizen who is rendering service to, or is commissioned in, the armed forces of a foreign country under any of the circumstances mentioned in

paragraph (a) or (b), shall not be permitted to participate nor vote in any election of the Republic of the Philippines during the period of his service to, or commission in, the armed forces of said country. Upon his discharge from the service of the said foreign country, he shall be automatically entitled to the full enjoyment of his civil and political rights as a Filipino citizen x x x.

Whatever doubt that remained regarding his loss of Philippine citizenship was erased by his naturalization as a U.S. citizen on June 5, 1990, in connection with his service in the U.S. Marine Corps.

On March 17, 1994, respondent Cruz reacquired his Philippine citizenship through repatriation under Republic Act No. 2630.^[3] He ran for and was elected as the Representative of the Second District of Pangasinan in the May 11, 1998 elections. He won by a convincing margin of 26,671 votes over petitioner Antonio Bengson III, who was then running for reelection.

Subsequently, petitioner filed a case for *Quo Warranto Ad Cautelam* with respondent House of Representatives Electoral Tribunal (HRET) claiming that respondent Cruz was not qualified to become a member of the House of Representatives since he is not a natural-born citizen as required under Article VI, Section 6 of the Constitution.^[4]

On March 2, 2000, the HRET rendered its decision^[5] dismissing the petition for *quo warranto* and declaring respondent Cruz the duly elected Representative of the Second District of Pangasinan in the May 1998 elections. The HRET likewise denied petitioner's motion for reconsideration of the decision in its resolution dated April 27, 2000.^[6]

Petitioner thus filed the present petition for *certiorari* assailing the HRET's decision on the following grounds:

1. The HRET committed serious errors and grave abuse of discretion, amounting to excess of jurisdiction, when it ruled that private respondent is a natural-born citizen of the Philippines *despite the fact that he had ceased being such in view of the loss and renunciation of such citizenship on his part.*
2. The HRET committed serious errors and grave abuse of discretion, amounting to excess of jurisdiction, when it considered private respondent as a citizen of the Philippines *despite the fact that he did not validly acquire his Philippine citizenship.*
3. Assuming that private respondent's acquisition of Philippine citizenship was invalid, the HRET committed serious errors and grave abuse of discretion, amounting to excess of jurisdiction, when it dismissed the petition *despite the fact that such reacquisition could not legally and constitutionally restore his natural-born status.*^[7]

The issue now before us is whether respondent Cruz, a natural-born Filipino who became an American citizen, can still be considered a natural-born Filipino upon his reacquisition of Philippine citizenship.

Petitioner asserts that respondent Cruz may no longer be considered a natural-born Filipino since he lost his Philippine citizenship when he swore allegiance to the United States in 1995, and had to reacquire the same by repatriation. He insists that Article IV, Section 2 of the Constitution expressly states that natural-born citizens are those who are citizens from birth without having to perform any act to acquire or perfect such citizenship.

Respondent on the other hand contends that he reacquired his status as a natural-born citizen when he was repatriated since the phrase "from birth" in Article IV, Section 2 refers to the innate, inherent and inborn characteristic of being a natural-born citizen.

The petition is without merit.

The 1987 Constitution enumerates who are Filipino citizens as follows:

- (1) Those who are citizens of the Philippines at the time of the adoption of this Constitution;
- (2) Those whose fathers or mothers are citizens of the Philippines;
- (3) Those born before January 17, 1973 of Filipino mothers, who elect Philippine citizenship upon reaching the age of majority, and
- (4) Those who are naturalized in accordance with law.^[8]

There are two ways of acquiring citizenship: (1) by birth, and (2) by naturalization. These ways of acquiring citizenship correspond to the two kinds of citizens: the natural-born citizen, and the naturalized citizen. A person who at the time of his birth is a citizen of a particular country, is a natural-born citizen thereof.^[9]

As defined in the same Constitution, natural-born citizens "are those citizens of the Philippines from birth without having to perform any act to acquire or perfect his Philippine citizenship."^[10]

On the other hand, naturalized citizens are those who have become Filipino citizens through naturalization, generally under Commonwealth Act No. 473, otherwise known as the Revised Naturalization Law, which repealed the former Naturalization Law (Act No. 2927), and by Republic Act No. 530.^[11] To be naturalized, an applicant has to prove that he possesses all the qualifications^[12] and none of the disqualifications^[13] provided by law to become a Filipino citizen. The decision granting Philippine citizenship becomes executory only after two (2) years from its promulgation when the court is satisfied that during the intervening period, the applicant has (1) not left the Philippines; (2) has dedicated himself to a lawful calling or profession; (3) has not been convicted of any offense or violation of Government promulgated rules; or (4) committed any act prejudicial to the interest of the nation or contrary to any Government announced policies.^[14]

Filipino citizens who have lost their citizenship may however reacquire the same in the manner provided by law. Commonwealth Act. No. 63 (C.A. No. 63), enumerates the three modes by which Philippine citizenship may be reacquired by a former citizen: (1) by naturalization, (2) by repatriation, and (3) by direct act of Congress.^[15]

Naturalization is a mode for both acquisition and reacquisition of Philippine citizenship. As a mode of initially acquiring Philippine citizenship, naturalization is governed by Commonwealth Act No. 473, as amended. On the other hand, naturalization as a mode for reacquiring Philippine citizenship is governed by Commonwealth Act No. 63.^[16] Under this law, a former Filipino citizen who wishes to reacquire Philippine citizenship must possess certain qualifications^[17] and none of the disqualifications mentioned in Section 4 of C.A. 473.^[18]

Repatriation, on the other hand, may be had under various statutes by those who lost their citizenship due to: (1) desertion of the armed forces;^[19] (2) service in the armed forces of the allied forces in World War II;^[20] (3) service in the Armed Forces of the United States at any other time;^[21] (4) marriage of a Filipino woman to an alien;^[22] and (5) political and economic necessity.^[23]

As distinguished from the lengthy process of naturalization, repatriation simply consists of the taking of an oath of allegiance to the Republic of the Philippines and registering said oath in the Local Civil Registry of the place where the person concerned resides or last resided.

In *Angat v. Republic*,^[24] we held:

xxx. Parenthetically, under these statutes [referring to RA Nos. 965 and 2630], the person desiring to reacquire Philippine citizenship would *not* even be required to file a petition in court, and all that he had to do was to take an oath of allegiance to the Republic of the Philippines and to register that fact with the civil registry in the place of his residence or where he had last resided in the Philippines. [Italics in the original.]^[25]

Moreover, repatriation results in the *recovery of the original nationality*.^[26] This means that a naturalized Filipino who lost his citizenship will be restored to his prior status as a naturalized Filipino citizen. On the other hand, if he was originally a natural-born citizen before he lost his Philippine citizenship, he will be restored to his former status as a natural-born Filipino.

In respondent Cruz's case, he lost his Filipino citizenship when he rendered service in the Armed Forces of the United States. However, he subsequently reacquired Philippine citizenship under R.A. No. 2630, which provides:

Section 1. Any person who had lost his Philippine citizenship by rendering service to, or accepting commission in, the Armed Forces of the United States, or after separation from the Armed Forces of the United States, acquired United States citizenship, may reacquire Philippine citizenship by taking an oath of allegiance to the Republic of the Philippines and registering the same with Local Civil Registry in the place where he resides or last resided in the Philippines. The said oath of allegiance shall contain a renunciation of any other citizenship.

Having thus taken the required oath of allegiance to the Republic and having registered the same in the Civil Registry of Magantarem, Pangasinan in accordance with the aforecited provision, respondent Cruz is deemed to have recovered his original status as a natural-born citizen, a status which he acquired at birth as the

son of a Filipino father.^[27] It bears stressing that the act of repatriation allows him to *recover, or return to, his original status before he lost his Philippine citizenship.*

Petitioner's contention that respondent Cruz is no longer a natural-born citizen since he had to perform an act to regain his citizenship is untenable. As correctly explained by the HRET in its decision, the term "natural-born citizen" was first defined in Article III, Section 4 of the 1973 Constitution as follows:

Sec. 4. A natural-born citizen is one who is a citizen of the Philippines from birth without having to perform any act to acquire or perfect his Philippine citizenship.

Two requisites must concur for a person to be considered as such: (1) a person must be a Filipino citizen from birth and (2) he does not have to perform any act to obtain or perfect his Philippine citizenship.

Under the 1973 Constitution definition, there were two categories of Filipino citizens which were not considered natural-born: (1) those who were naturalized and (2) those born before January 17, 1973,^[28] of Filipino mothers who, upon reaching the age of majority, elected Philippine citizenship. Those "naturalized citizens" were not considered natural-born obviously because they were not Filipinos at birth and had to perform an act to acquire Philippine citizenship. Those born of Filipino mothers before the effectivity of the 1973 Constitution were likewise not considered natural-born because they also had to perform an act to perfect their Philippine citizenship.

The present Constitution, however, now considers those born of Filipino mothers before the effectivity of the 1973 Constitution and who elected Philippine citizenship upon reaching the majority age as natural-born. After defining who are natural-born citizens, Section 2 of Article IV adds a sentence: "Those who elect Philippine citizenship in accordance with paragraph (3), Section 1 hereof shall be deemed natural-born citizens." Consequently, only naturalized Filipinos are considered not natural-born citizens. It is apparent from the enumeration of who are citizens under the present Constitution that there are only two classes of citizens: (1) those who are natural-born and (2) those who are naturalized in accordance with law. A citizen who is not a naturalized Filipino, *i.e.*, did not have to undergo the process of naturalization to obtain Philippine citizenship, necessarily is a natural-born Filipino. Noteworthy is the absence in said enumeration of a separate category for persons who, after losing Philippine citizenship, subsequently reacquire it. The reason therefor is clear: as to such persons, they would either be natural-born or naturalized depending on the reasons for the loss of their citizenship and the mode prescribed by the applicable law for the reacquisition thereof. As respondent Cruz was not required by law to go through naturalization proceedings in order to reacquire his citizenship, he is perforce a natural-born Filipino. As such, he possessed all the necessary qualifications to be elected as member of the House of Representatives.

A final point. The HRET has been empowered by the Constitution to be the "sole judge" of all contests relating to the election, returns, and qualifications of the members of the House.^[29] The Court's jurisdiction over the HRET is merely to check "whether or not there has been a grave abuse of discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction" on the part of the latter.^[30] In the absence thereof, there is no occasion for the Court to exercise its corrective power and annul the decision of the HRET nor to substitute the Court's judgment for that of the latter for the simple