

FIRST DIVISION

[G.R. No. 124478, March 11, 1998]

**VICTOR AFRICA, PETITIONER, VS. THE HONORABLE
SANDIGANBAYAN (THIRD DIVISION); ROMAN MABANTA, JR.;
AND EDUARDO DE LOS ANGELES, RESPONDENTS.**

D E C I S I O N

DAVIDE, JR., J.:

This petition for *certiorari* under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court seeks to annul the resolutions of the Sandiganbayan dated 30 January 1996^[1] and 29 March 1996^[2] dismissing Civil Case No. 0146^[3] and denying petitioner's motion for reconsideration, respectively.

A summary of the prior relevant events, as gathered from the voluminous records elevated to this Court by the Sandiganbayan^[4] and from G.R. No. 83831 entitled *Africa v. PCGG*,^[5] is appropriate for a better understanding of the case.

Pursuant to its powers under Executive Order No.1^[6] promulgated by then President Corazon C. Aquino on 28 February 1986, the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) sequestered on 14 March 1986 the Eastern Telecommunications Philippines, Inc. (ETPI). Two months later, the sequestration pertaining to 40% of the capital stock (Class "B" shares) owned by Cable and Wireless, Ltd., a foreign corporation, was lifted. It, however, remained in force on the remaining 60% of the capital stock (Class "A" shares) consisting of the shares of Roberto S. Benedicto; Jose L. Africa; Polygon Investments & Managers, Inc.; and Universal Molasses Corporation and all shares wherein the late President Ferdinand E. Marcos was deemed the beneficial owner.^[7]

On 22 July 1987, the PCGG filed with the Sandiganbayan Civil Case No. 0009 for the reconveyance, reversion, accounting, and restitution of the alleged ill-gotten ETPI shares, and for damages.

Then followed various incidents, which this Court narrated in G.R. No. 83831; thus:

Subsequently, during the annual stockholders meeting convened on January 29, 1988 pursuant to a PCGG Resolution dated January 28, 1988 which called for the resumption of the stockholders meeting originally scheduled on January 4, 1988, Eduardo M. Villanueva, as PCGG nominee, Roman Mabanta, Jr. and Eduardo de los Angeles as nominees of the foreign investors, Cable Wireless Ltd., and Jose L. Africa (who was absent) were elected as members of the board of directors.

An organizational meeting was later held where Eduardo Villanueva was elected as president and general manager, while Ramon Desuasido, Almario Velasco and Ranulfo Payos were elected as acting corporate secretary, acting treasurer, and acting assistant corporate secretary, respectively.

The nomination and election of PCGG nominees/designees to the ETPI Board of Directors, as well as the election of its new officers, triggered a chain of contentious proceedings before the Sandiganbayan and this Court between the members of the ETPI Board and its stockholders, on the one hand, and the PCGG's nominees/designees elected to the ETPI Board, on the other hand, in the cases hereinunder discussed.

Victor Africa, who claims to be an employee of ETPI holding the positions of vice-president, general counsel (on official leave without pay), corporate secretary and special assistant to the chairman (and president), filed directly with this Court on June 30, 1988 a petition for injunction docketed as G.R. No. 83831, seeking to enjoin the PCGG and its nominees/designees to the board of directors and the newly-installed officers of ETPI from implementing their alleged illegal, invalid and immoral act of ousting him from his offices and positions at the ETPI pending the determination of whether they have validly, legally and morally assumed their supposed positions and offices as "directors" and/or "officers" of ETPI.

He contends that the reasons advanced by the PCGG-sponsored board of directors for ousting him from his offices (redundancy, need to conserve company funds and loss of confidence) are flimsy, whimsical and arbitrary, evidencing not only the PCGG-sponsored board's discriminatory and oppressive attitude towards him but, more importantly, its clear intent to harass him into refraining from questioning before several tribunals all the invalid, illegal and immoral acts of said PCGG-sponsored board which have caused and are still causing ETPI damages because they constitute dissipation of assets.

Further claiming that the acts of respondents will work injustice, unfairness and inequity to him as they will invalidly, illegally and immorally deprive him of his principal means of livelihood to the detriment of his spouse and three children, petitioner sought the issuance of a writ of preliminary injunction or a temporary restraining order to enjoin the PCGG from ousting him from his positions and offices effective June 30, 1988.

On July 8, 1988, petitioner informed the Court that while a verbal agreement to maintain the *status quo* was reached between petitioner's lawyers, Attys. Juan de Ocampo and Antonio Africa, and Messrs. Orlando Romero and Serafin Rivera of the PCGG, respondent Eduardo M. Villanueva circulated on July 5, 1988 an inter-office memorandum easing out the legitimate members of the board from their rooms in the executive offices for the benefit of the newly-installed members of the questioned PCGG board; and that Ildefonso Reynoso, vice-president for administration, issued a memorandum to the Nival Security and Protective Agency informing them that they were being relieved of their duty to provide security services at the 7th Floor of Telecoms Plaza where the executive offices are located, which services would then be handled by the FCA Security Agency.

On July 15, 1988, petitioner was allegedly forcibly taken out of his office on the basis of a PCGG order which petitioner claimed was addressed not to then PCGG Commissioner Laureta but to three other PCGG officials, namely, Esteban B. Conejos, Jr., Serafin P. Rivera and Orlando Z. Romero. As a consequence, petitioner Africa sought to have then Commissioner Laureta declared in contempt of court for having committed "improper

conduct tending directly or indirectly, to impede, obstruct or degrade the administration of justice.” He likewise sought the issuance of a writ of preliminary mandatory injunction ordering respondents to open his office and allow him access to and use of the same.^[8]

In the decision of 9 January 1992, we held that the issues raised in G.R. No. 83831, as well as in the motion for contempt filed by Eduardo Villanueva, were factual in nature and could be best ventilated before the Sandiganbayan – “the proper forum where both parties [could] substantiate their respective claims.” We then referred the said case to the Sandiganbayan for appropriate proceedings and ordered its consolidation with Civil Case No. 0009. The said case was subsequently docketed as Civil Case No. 0146. Thereafter, the petitioner filed a motion for summary judgment, which the Sandiganbayan denied for lack of merit.

The private respondents then filed their answer with counterclaim in Civil Case No. 0146. They reiterated that the petitioner was not a legitimate stockholder, but merely a dummy for the late President Marcos; he was not, therefore, entitled to examine the corporate records.

In the *interim*, the petitioner filed separate motions, among which was for the production and inspection of documents.

In its resolution^[9] of 10 January 1994, the Sandiganbayan granted petitioner’s motion for the production and inspection of documents pertaining to the transfer of ETPI shares to the private respondents, including the certificates of shares of stock and the name, title, authority, and address of the person who entered the changes in the stock and transfer book.

Private respondents De los Angeles and Mabanta thereafter filed an omnibus motion for a reconsideration of the resolution and for the dismissal of Civil Case No. 0146. They contended that in G.R. No. 83831 (now Civil Case No. 0146), this Court did not grant petitioner’s prayer for a temporary restraining order to enjoin the PCGG and the new board of directors and officers “from ousting the petitioner from his offices and positions at ETPI and even from his room during the pendency of the petition.” They concluded that in the absence of a restraining order, the petitioner was validly stripped off of his positions, thereby rendering his petition moot and academic. They also cited *Africa v. PCGG*^[10] where this Court pronounced that they were elected as nominees of the foreign investor Cable and Wireless, Ltd., owner of the Class “B” shares, which were outside the scope of sequestration. They then argued that in light of this Court’s rulings in *PCGG v. Peña*^[11] and *San Miguel Corporation v. Khan*,^[12] the Sandiganbayan did not have jurisdiction over them because the shares pertaining to them were neither ill-gotten nor sequestered.

The petitioner opposed the omnibus motion because the validity of private respondents’ election as members of the board remained the principal issue of his petition and their eventual replacement in the board did not absolve them from any responsibility for acts committed during their term.

In reply, the private respondents stressed that their vote as directors to oust the petitioner from his positions and their right to sit as board members were issues which were not in any way related to the sequestration or recovery of ill-gotten wealth of which the Sandiganbayan exercises exclusive original jurisdiction.

In its Resolution of 30 January 1996,^[13] the Sandiganbayan granted private respondents' motion and dismissed Civil Case No. 0416. It ruled that the petition for injunction was moot and academic and could no longer prosper, since the act sought to be enjoined had already been consummated. Besides, the Sandiganbayan had no jurisdiction over respondents De los Angeles and Mabanta because their shares were no longer covered by a writ of sequestration. Moreover, they were eventually replaced by two British representatives.

His motion for a reconsideration of the resolution having been denied for lack of merit in the resolution^[14] of the Sandiganbayan of 29 March 1996, the petitioner filed this special civil action for *certiorari* under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court contending that

- a. The Sandiganbayan acted in *grave abuse of discretion* when it dismissed the case (ordered by this Honorable Court to be consolidated with SB Case No. 0009) ... in lieu of taking the "appropriate proceedings" as directed by this Honorable Court.
- b. The Sandiganbayan acted in *grave abuse of discretion* when it dismissed the case (even while it was already conducting hearings in the other cases on the "substantially identical" reliefs) ... instead of including the case in the said hearings.
- c. The Sandiganbayan acted in *grave abuse of discretion* when it dismissed the case (not only against the respondents Mabanta and De los Angeles who were no longer ETPI directors, but also as against PCGG and the other non-PCGG respondents) ... rather than just dropping the non-involved respondents and continuing with the others.
- d. The Sandiganbayan acted in *grave abuse of discretion* when it "found" the shares involved (of Mabanta and De los Angeles) not to be sequestered ... notwithstanding the absence of any document excluding them from the sequestration previously imposed thereon by earlier documents.

On the other hand, the private respondents allege that the dismissal of Civil Case No. 0416 was based on the evidence and law. The original petition was in the nature of a preliminary prohibitory injunction, and not a preliminary mandatory injunction as claimed by the petitioner. Since no injunction was granted by this Court, petitioner's ouster in 1988 became *fait accompli*.

To refute petitioner's allegation that there was no evidence showing that their shares were outside the scope of sequestration, the private respondents cite the PCGG order of 14 May 1986, as well as the pronouncement of this Court in *Africa v. PCGG*; thus:

The sequestration of Eastern Telecommunications Philippines, Inc. is lifted. Henceforth, sequestration is limited to the shares of Roberto S. Benedicto, Jose L. Africa, Polygon Investments, Universal Molasses and all shares wherein Ferdinand E. Marcos is the beneficial owner.^[15]

...

Shortly after the PCGG sequestered ETPI on March 14, 1986, the sequestration order was partially lifted in May 1986 when 40% of the shares of stock (Class "B") owned by the Cable and Wireless, Ltd. were freed from the effects of sequestration.^[16]