



Republic of the Philippines
 Supreme Court
 Manila

SECOND DIVISION

ANGELINA CHUA and HEIRS OF
 JOSE MA. CHENG SING PHUAN,
 Petitioners,

G.R. No. 219309

Present:

CARPIO, J., *Chairperson*,
 PERALTA,
 PERLAS-BERNABE,
 CAGUIOA, and
 REYES, JR., * JJ.

- versus -

SPOUSES SANTIAGO CHENG
 AND AVELINA SIHIYON,
 Respondents.

Promulgated:

22 NOV 2017

Micaela Lopez

X -----X

DECISION

CAGUIOA, J.:

The Case

This is a petition for review on *certiorari*¹ (Petition) filed under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court assailing the Decision² (Assailed Decision) dated November 27, 2014 and Resolution³ (Assailed Resolution) dated May 25, 2015 issued by the Court of Appeals Eighteenth Division (CA) in CA-G.R. SP. No. 07194.

The Assailed Decision and Resolution dismissed the petition for *certiorari* (CA Petition) filed by Angelina Chua (Angelina) and the heirs of Jose Ma. Cheng Sing Phuan⁴ (Heirs of Jose) (collectively, Petitioners) which imputed grave abuse of discretion to Judge Victorino O. Maniba, Jr. (Judge Maniba), in his capacity as Presiding Judge of the Regional Trial Court of Iloilo City, Branch 39 (RTC), for issuing the following in Civil Case No. 03-27527:

* On leave.

¹ *Rollo*, pp. 5-40.

² Id. at 41-51. Penned by Associate Justice Gabriel T. Ingles, with Associate Justices Pamela Ann Abella Maxino and Renato C. Francisco concurring.

³ Id. at 52-53.

⁴ Cesar C. Cheng, Edward S. Chua, Mary Cheng Toliogco, Caroline Cheng Kiok, Helen Cheng Suyo, Hilton S. Cheng and Margaret Cheng Go; id. at 6.

MSR

- (i) Resolution (RTC Resolution) dated January 27, 2012 denying the oral motion of Petitioners to present additional witnesses other than those listed in the Pre-Trial *Order*; and
- (ii) Order (RTC Order) dated June 13, 2012 denying Petitioners' motion for reconsideration (MR) of the RTC Resolution.⁵

The Facts

Jose Ma. Cheng Sing Phuan (Jose), Santiago Cheng (Santiago), and Petra Cheng Sing (Petra) are siblings.⁶

The records show that Jose, Santiago, and Petra are the registered owners of two (2) parcels of land situated in Iloilo City, covered by Transfer Certificates of Title Nos. T-53608 and T-53609 (Iloilo Lands).⁷ On these lands stands a rice mill housing several pieces of milling equipment, also in the name of the Cheng siblings.⁸

RTC Proceedings

Santiago, together with his wife, Avelina Sihiyon (Avelina) (collectively, Respondents) sent Jose and his wife Angelina several written and verbal demands for the physical partition of the Iloilo Lands, the rice mill and the equipment therein (collectively, Disputed Properties).⁹

As their repeated demands were left unheeded, Respondents filed a complaint against Jose and Angelina for partition and damages (Complaint) before the RTC.¹⁰

In their Answer, Jose and Angelina averred that they advanced the funds necessary for the acquisition of the Disputed Properties, and that Santiago and Petra failed to reimburse them for the cost of their respective shares.¹¹ On such basis, Jose and Angelina argued that Santiago, Petra, and their respective spouses do not possess any right to demand the partition of the Disputed Properties.¹²

After submission of the parties' pre-trial briefs and the conduct of a pre-trial conference, Judge Cedrick O. Ruiz (Judge Ruiz), then Presiding Judge of the RTC, issued a Pre-Trial *Order*¹³ dated January 12, 2006.¹⁴ Items VI and VIII of the Pre-Trial *Order* state, in part:

⁵ *Rollo*, p. 42.

⁶ See *id.* at 42, 70-71, 83.

⁷ *Id.* at 83.

⁸ See *id.* at 42, 84.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 42, 82 and 84.

¹¹ See *id.* at 42-43.

¹² See *id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 82-94.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 43.



VI. EVIDENCE FOR THE PARTIES

All evidence to be adduced and presented by both parties shall be limited to those identified below. All photocopies of documentary evidence have already been pre-marked, the original copies of which will be presented in due time.

- A. Evidence of [Respondents]
 x x x x
- B. Evidence of [Jose and Angelina]
1. Documentary Evidence
 x x x x
 2. Testimonial Evidence
 - a.) [Jose]; and
 - b.) [Petra]
- x x x x

VIII. COLATILLA

The parties are hereby directed to go over this Pre-[T]rial Order for any error that may have been committed and to take the necessary steps to correct the same within a non-extendible period of five (5) days from receipt of a copy thereof. Thereafter, no corrections will be allowed.¹⁵ (Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

None of the parties manifested any intent to revise the Pre-Trial *Order*. Thus, trial ensued.

Subsequently, Jose passed away after having given his direct testimony in open court. Accordingly, Jose's counsel Atty. Roberto Leong (Atty. Leong) filed a Notice of Death with Motion to Suspend Proceeding dated February 24, 2007, followed by a Motion to Withdraw as Counsel dated May 9, 2007.¹⁶ These motions were granted.¹⁷

On June 15, 2007, Petitioners, through their new counsel Atty. Nelson C. Oberas (Atty. Oberas), filed a Formal Appearance of New Counsel and Notice of Substitution of Party Defendant,¹⁸ which were duly noted by Judge Ruiz in his Order dated June 25, 2007.¹⁹

Later, Respondents filed an Urgent Motion dated July 13, 2007 praying that Jose's testimony be stricken from the records since he passed away before cross-examination.²⁰ Judge Ruiz denied the Urgent Motion and Respondents' subsequent MR.²¹ Thereafter, trial continued.

¹⁵ Id. at 86-87, 94.

¹⁶ Id. at 8-9, 43.

¹⁷ Id. at 43.

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Id. at 9, 43.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Id. at 9-10, 43.

During the hearing held on January 16, 2008, Petitioners orally manifested in open court that they would be presenting six (6) additional witnesses in place of Petra, and sought leave for this purpose.²² These additional witnesses were not among those listed in the Pre-Trial *Order*, nor were they identified in Jose's Pre-Trial *Brief*.²³ Respondents opposed, and later filed their written objection on March 24, 2008.²⁴

In the interim, Judge Maniba assumed the position of Presiding Judge of the RTC.²⁵

On January 27, 2012, Judge Maniba issued the RTC Resolution denying Petitioners' oral motion. Petitioners subsequently filed an MR, which Judge Maniba also denied in the RTC Order dated June 13, 2012.²⁶

CA Proceedings

Aggrieved, Petitioners filed the CA Petition.²⁷ Petitioners asserted that Jose, through counsel, reserved the right to present additional witnesses in his **Pre-Trial Brief**. By completely ignoring such reservation made by Jose prior to his death, Petitioners averred that Judge Maniba committed grave abuse of discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction.²⁸

On November 27, 2014, the CA issued the Assailed Decision dismissing the CA Petition for lack of merit. The dispositive portion of said Decision reads:

WHEREFORE, the instant petition is hereby **DISMISSED**. The [RTC Resolution] and the [RTC Order] x x x in Civil Case No. 03-27527 are **AFFIRMED**.

SO ORDERED.²⁹

Notwithstanding the reservation in Jose's Pre-Trial *Brief*, the CA held that the **Pre-Trial Order** categorically stated that only Jose's testimony, and that of Petra's, would be presented on Jose's behalf. Considering that Atty. Leong did not take any steps to amend the Pre-Trial *Order* to reflect the general reservation appearing in Jose's Pre-Trial *Brief*, Judge Maniba could not be faulted for exercising his discretion to exclude Petitioners' additional witnesses from trial.³⁰

Petitioners filed an MR, which the CA denied in the Assailed Resolution dated May 25, 2015. Petitioners received the Assailed Resolution on June 26, 2015.³¹

²² Id. at 10, 44.

²³ See id. at 44, 80.

²⁴ Id. at 44.

²⁵ The exact date of Judge Maniba's assumption of office cannot be ascertained from the records.

²⁶ *Rollo*, p. 42.

²⁷ Id. at 44.

²⁸ See id.

²⁹ Id. at 50-51.

³⁰ Id. at 44-45.

³¹ Id. at 7.

Hence, Petitioners filed the present Petition on July 13, 2015.³²

Respondents filed their Comment³³ on November 5, 2015, to which Petitioners filed their Reply³⁴ on November 13, 2015.

The Issue

The sole issue for this Court's resolution is whether the CA erred when it affirmed the RTC Resolution and Order denying Petitioners' oral motion to present witnesses not listed in the Pre-Trial *Order*.

The Court's Ruling

The Petition should be denied for lack of merit. The Court finds no ascribable error on the part of the CA in affirming the RTC Resolution and Order, as these issuances merely enforce the rules governing pre-trial.

Paragraph (A)(2)(d) of A.M. No. 03-1-09-SC does not apply.

Petitioners assert that the rigid application of the rules governing pre-trial will curtail the truth and frustrate the ends of justice at their expense.³⁵ To support this assertion, Petitioners quote³⁶ A.M. No. 03-1-09-SC, otherwise known as the *Proposed Rule on Guidelines to be Observed by Trial Court Judges and Clerks of Court in the Conduct of Pre-Trial and Use of Deposition-Discovery Measures*³⁷ (Pre-Trial Guidelines), particularly paragraph A(2)(d) thereof, which states:

PRE-TRIAL

A. Civil Cases

x x x x

2. The parties shall submit, at least three (3) days before the pre-trial, pre-trial briefs containing the following:

x x x x

- d. The documents or exhibits to be presented, stating the purpose thereof. **(No evidence shall be allowed to be presented and offered during the trial in support of a party's evidence-in-chief other than those that had been earlier identified and pre-marked during the pre-trial, except if allowed by the court for good cause shown).** (Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

³² Id. at 5, 7. Under Section 2 of Rule 45, Petitioners were given fifteen (15) days from receipt of the Assailed Resolution to file a petition for review on *certiorari*. However, since the expiration of said fifteen (15)-day period fell on July 11, 2015, a Saturday, Petitioners had until July 13, 2015, the next working day, to do so. Accordingly, the Petition was timely filed.

³³ Id. at 115-124.

³⁴ Id. at 134-139.

³⁵ See id. at 16.

³⁶ Id. at 30.

³⁷ Approved on July 13, 2004.

Petitioners' reliance on the purported exception under paragraph A(2)(d) is misplaced. As its introductory phrase clearly indicates, paragraph A(2) enumerates the matters which parties are required to state in the pre-trial brief. Since paragraph A(2) does not prescribe rules on admissibility and presentation of evidence, it should not be interpreted in this manner.

In addition, paragraph (A)(2)(d) refers to documentary and object evidence, and not testimonial evidence, which, in turn, are treated separately under paragraph (A)(2)(f).³⁸ Accordingly, the scope of the specific exception under paragraph A(2)(d) should not be unduly extended to cover testimonial evidence.

Even assuming, *arguendo*, that the exception under paragraph A(2)(d) may be invoked as basis to allow the presentation of witnesses not listed in the pre-trial order, its application remains contingent upon a showing of good cause sufficient to justify the same. Petitioners attempted to satisfy this condition by citing "special and extraordinary circumstances" which they claim should have impelled the RTC to allow the presentation of their additional witnesses. The Petition summarizes these circumstances, as follows:

- A. The presence of a written reservation³⁹ by then counsel of x x x [Jose and Angelina] to present additional witnesses x x x as shown in [their] [P]re-[T]rial [B]rief x x x[;]
- B. The oral manifestation⁴⁰ of then counsel of x x x [Jose and Angelina], Atty. Leong, that he is reserving five (5) more witnesses depending on

³⁸ Paragraph (A)(2)(f) of the Pre-Trial Guidelines states:

A. Civil Cases

x x x x

2. The parties shall submit, at least three (3) days before the pre-trial, pre-trial briefs containing the following:

x x x x

- f. The number and names of the witnesses, the substance of their testimonies, and the approximate number of hours that will be required by the parties for the presentation of their respective witnesses.

³⁹ See *rollo*, pp. 19-20. The written reservation in Jose's Pre-Trial *Brief* reads:

NUMBER AND NAMES OF WITNESSES

[Jose and Angelina] will testify on the special and affirmative defenses and the denials in their answer and will identify the documents that will be presented. If necessary, [Angelina] will corroborate the testimony of [Jose]. Depending on the development of the trial, [Jose and Angelina] reserve their right to present additional witnesses. (Emphasis and underscoring omitted)

⁴⁰ See *id.* at 13-14. The relevant portions of the TSN for the hearing dated July 17, 2006 states:

ATTY. LEONG:

That's all with the witness.

COURT: Cross-examination please x x x.

[RESPONDENTS' COUNSEL]:

If we will be allowed, we will consolidate our notes, we will cross-examine the witness next hearing.

COURT: Any objection on the part of the counsel for [Petitioners]? The counsel for the [Respondents] has to consolidate his notes in order to prepare his intelligent cross-examination to x x x [Jose].

August 14 and 16?

x x x x

the outcome of the cross-examination of x x x [Jose], without objection interposed by [Respondents] at that time as recorded x x x in [the Transcript of Stenographic Notes (TSN)] x x x.

- C. The fact that on July 17, 2006, [Judge Ruiz, then Presiding Judge of the RTC] x x x allowed the presentation of additional witnesses for the [Petitioners] by setting six (6) additional calendar dates for the presentation of evidence of the [Petitioners] even after the Pre-Trial Order had already been issued x x x[.]⁴¹(Emphasis and underscoring omitted)

The Court finds these circumstances grossly insufficient to support Petitioners' cause.

As correctly pointed out by the CA in the Assailed Decision, neither Jose nor his counsel Atty. Leong took the necessary steps to cause the revision of the Pre-Trial *Order* to reflect the general reservation in Jose's Pre-Trial *Brief*, notwithstanding the explicit directive to make such necessary corrections in the *Colatilla* portion of the Pre-Trial *Order*. This failure binds the Petitioners as substitute parties, being mere representatives of the latter's interests in the present case.⁴²

Moreover, the setting of additional hearing dates following the direct examination of Jose should not be impliedly taken as a grant of leave to present Petitioners' additional witnesses. To be sure, the hearing dates in question were set on **July 17, 2006**. Petitioners do not deny that they sought leave to present their six (6) additional witnesses *only* on **January 16, 2008**,⁴³ one (1) year and five (5) months *after* the additional hearing dates were set. If Judge Ruiz did in fact grant Jose leave to present witnesses excluded in the Pre-Trial *Order*, Petitioners would not have sought such leave anew. Evidently, Petitioners' argument that Judge Ruiz already allowed such presentation, and that Judge Maniba was bound to honor such previous directive, is a mere afterthought.

Finally, it bears stressing that Petitioners neither furnished the Court with copies of the judicial affidavits of their additional witnesses, nor make any allegations detailing the substance of their respective testimonies.

There being no objection on the part of the counsel for [Petitioners], the motion for a continuance filed by the counsel for [Respondents] to allow him to prepare an intelligent cross-examination of the first witness for the [Petitioners], x x x [Jose], let the said cross-examination be conducted on [August 14, 2006] at 10:00 o'clock in the morning x x x.

x x x x

Would he be your sole witness, [counsel for Petitioners]?

ATTY. LEONG:

It would depend on the cross-examination. We will be presenting five [5] more x x x.

COURT: Aside from the [August 16, 2006] setting, let this case be also heard on [September] 13, 18, 25 and 27 and [October 2,] 2006, all at 10:00 o'clock in the morning.

⁴¹ Id. at 19-20.

⁴² See generally *Regalado v. Regalado*, 665 Phil. 837 (2011).

⁴³ *Rollo*, p. 44.

Hence, the Court is left without any opportunity to determine if the presentation of said witnesses is indeed necessary to “ferret out the whole truth,”⁴⁴ as Petitioners claim.

The rules governing pre-trial remain controlling in this case.

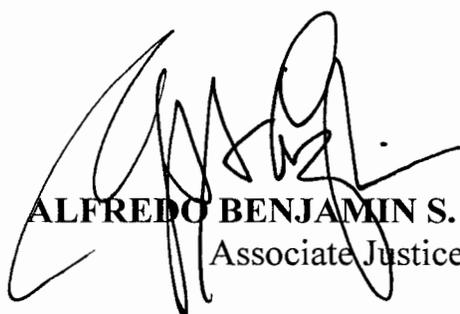
The importance of pre-trial in civil cases cannot be overemphasized.⁴⁵ Time and again, this Court has recognized “the importance of pre-trial procedure as a means of facilitating the disposal of cases by simplifying or limiting the issues and avoiding unnecessary proof of facts at the trial, and x x x to do whatever may reasonably be necessary to facilitate and shorten the formal trial.”⁴⁶ The need for strict adherence to the rules on pre-trial thus proceeds from its significant role in the litigation process.⁴⁷

This is not to say, however, that the rules governing pre-trial should be, at all times, applied in absolute terms. While faithful compliance with these rules is undoubtedly desirable, they may be relaxed in cases where their application would frustrate, rather than facilitate, the ends of justice.⁴⁸ The relaxation of these rules, however, is contingent upon a showing of compelling and persuasive reasons to justify the same.⁴⁹

It is the Court’s considered view that Petitioners have failed to sufficiently show that such compelling and persuasive reasons exist in this case. Consequently, the Petition must be denied.

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the petition for review on *certiorari* is **DENIED**. The Assailed Decision dated November 27, 2014 and Resolution dated May 25, 2015 issued by the Court of Appeals Eighteenth Division in CA-G.R. SP. No. 07194 are hereby **AFFIRMED**.

SO ORDERED.


ALFREDO BENJAMIN S. CAGUIOA
Associate Justice

⁴⁴ Id. at 23.

⁴⁵ *Spouses Salvador v. Spouses Rabaja*, 753 Phil. 175, 192 (2015).

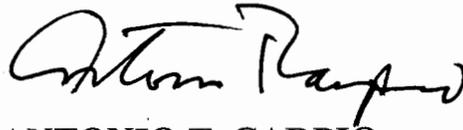
⁴⁶ *Lim v. Animas*, 159 Phil. 1010, 1012 (1975).

⁴⁷ *Spouses Salvador v. Spouses Rabaja*, supra note 45, at 191-192.

⁴⁸ *Vette Industrial Sales Co., Inc. v. Cheng*, 539 Phil. 37, 48, 49 and 52 (2006).

⁴⁹ See *Domingo v. Spouses Singson*, G.R. Nos. 203287 & 207936, April 5, 2017, p. 9.

WE CONCUR:



ANTONIO T. CARPIO
Associate Justice
Chairperson



DIOSDADO M. PERALTA
Associate Justice



ESTELA M. PERLAS-BERNABE
Associate Justice

(On leave)

ANDRES B. REYES, JR.
Associate Justice

ATTESTATION

I attest that the conclusions in the above Decision had been reached in consultation before the case was assigned to the writer of the opinion of the Court's Division.



ANTONIO T. CARPIO
Associate Justice
Chairperson, Second Division

CERTIFICATION

Pursuant to Section 13, Article VIII of the Constitution and the Division Chairperson's Attestation, I certify that the conclusions in the above Decision had been reached in consultation before the case was assigned to the writer of the opinion of the Court's Division.



MARIA LOURDES P. A. SERENO
Chief Justice

