EN BANC

[A.M. No. P-25-244 (Formerly JIB FPI No. 21-071-P). July 08, 2025]

ANTOLYN DONES GONZALES, COMPLAINANT, VS. DWIGHT ALDWIN S. GERONIMO, SHERIFF IV, BRANCH 121, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT, IMUS CITY, CAVITE, RESPONDENT.

D E C I S I O N

PER CURIAM:

The instant case arose from the Complaint-Affidavit[1] dated November 15, 2021 filed by herein complainant Antolyn Dones Gonzales (Gonzales) against respondent Dwight Aldwin S. Geronimo (Geronimo), who at present is a Sheriff IV of Branch 121 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Imus City, Cavite, charging him of violation of Section 3(a) of Republic Act No. 3019 (Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act), gross misconduct, bribery, serious dishonesty and violation of Supreme Court rules, directives and circulars.

Antecedents

In the said Complaint, Gonzales alleged that in May 2019, he and his live-in partner, Deseree Banta (Banta) chanced upon Geronimo at the Autofixlane Motor Shop along Tanza, Cavite. Gonzales claimed that Geronimo was his former law school classmate and a brethren at the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), making them close friends.[2]

Geronimo told Gonzales that he was working as a court decongestion officer (CDO) in the RTC, Imus City, Cavite but will soon be appointed sheriff with the help and influence of then Executive Judge (now Court of Appeals Justice) Mary Charlene Hernandez-Azura (Judge Hernandez-Azura) or "Tita Chay" as Geronimo would call her.[3]

Gonzales then disclosed to Geronimo that he has a friend, Monib Saadoning Amatonding (Monib), who has a pending, non-bailable drugs case at Branch 89, RTC, Bacoor City, Cavite where Judge Hernandez-Azura was the assisting judge. Gonzales alleged that Geronimo bragged that he is the "bagman" of Judge Hernandez-Azura in several "bribed" cases. Geronimo claimed he drafts the decisions of cases handled by Judge Hernandez-Azura and the latter always approves the same, thus stating that the fate of every case handled by Judge Hernandez-Azura rests in his hands.[4]

Geronimo stated that it will all depend on how "generous" Monib is and, when asked by Gonzales what that means, he stated that Monib needs to give to "Eddie"—meaning "*Edi yung para sa akin*." Thus, Geronimo instructed Gonzales to talk to the family of Monib and tell them to produce PHP 200,000.00, otherwise, he will make sure Monib will be handed a guilty verdict.[5]

Gonzales then was able to secure approval from Mindanao-based the family of Monib to hire a lawyer who will represent them in the "transaction" with Geronimo. Thus, on May 2, 2019, Gonzales was able to hire a lawyer for Monib and thereafter, on the same day, handed to Geronimo the amount of PHP 115,000.00 as initial payment, the remaining balance was agreed to be given to Geronimo once the case of Monib was settled. No proof of payment was asked by Gonzales from Geronimo merely relying only on their friendship.[6]

On May 6, 2019, Gonzales, on the Facebook Messenger application (FB Messenger) asked Geronimo if he already talked to Judge Hernandez-Azura. Geronimo responded in the negative but gave this assurance: "*Positive yun pre. Ang inaalala ko lang baka hilahin ako [sa] Bacoor. Kagabi lang eh hinahanap na draft decision ko eh.*"[7]

On May 16, 2019, Gonzales again messaged Geronimo informing him of Monib's scheduled hearing the next day which Geronimo answered "*copy tol*."[8]

On May 18, 2019, Gonzales sent a link about a lawyer's ambush in San Pedro, Rizal through FB Messenger to Geronimo which had no connection to the case of Monib. However, Geronimo replied with a "crying emoji" and later sent Gonzales a disturbing photo that showed him with a rifle and a grenade in the background.[9]

On June 5, 2019, Gonzales gave an update to Geronimo via FB Messenger regarding the next hearing date of Monib. Geronimo asked Gonzales if the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) had been notified, to which Gonzales replied that he was not sure. Geronimo then stated: "*Sana notified sila at di makaattend. Bro, FYI only. Tita is inclined to grant the Petition for Bail. Kami lang nag-usap sa Coffee [P]roject but we need to do it procedural. Nakumbinsi ko sya. Huwag ka munang maingay. Pero sabi niya, magrelax relax muna si accused sa loob. Ilalabas natin s[i]ya. Sssssshhhh*!"[10] Gonzales felt that a favorable resolution was on the way.[11]

On June 8, 2019, Geronimo informed Gonzales that the court set two hearing dates in a month, instead of just one for the case of Monib. Geronimo appeared to be hinting that the case was being expedited.[12]

On June 21, 2019, the "transaction" encountered a setback when Geronimo informed Gonzalez that there will be new judges to be appointed in Imus, Cavite. Geronimo told Gonzales that it may be necessary for them to create a syndicate inside the Imus City court station as several people will have to be bribed to settle a case. According to Geronimo: "*Bro, update muna kita: May mga bagong uupo na judges sa Imus. Sa amin*

nira-raffle ang kaso every [W]ednesday. Now, kahit saan RTC mapunta di tayo mahihirapan. May mga malalapitan sa bawat korte. Medyo mababawasan ang kay EDI. Pero may mabubuo tayong sindikato na tayo magtutimon pero di dapat malaman ng mga boss natin... Meron na sa Br. 20 & 21."[13]

On the same day, Geronimo updated Gonzales by sending photos via FB Messenger with the accompanying statement: "*Sa Supreme Court yan kahapon bro. Nasa bahay ako now. Di makatulog magplantsa ng pinagagawa mo. D[i] ko nasabi sa iyo F. Rivera nagturo sa akin diskarte sa Demurrer na di na siya mag comment. Swak kaagad sa banga.*"[14] According to Gonzales the "F. Rivera" who Geronimo was pertaining to one Fiscal Rivera who is supposedly the assistant provincial prosecutor in Cavite.

On June 25, 2019, Geronimo sent another message to Gonzales stating: "*Tol, magusap kami mamayang hapon after hearing. Dko maupuhap si tita kahapon.*"[15] On the same date, another message was sent: "*Bro, hintayin lang yung TSN ng stenographer daw at hindi pa nagagawa. Tatawagan nya daw ako para sa recommended reso. Pumunta daw ako dun sa 89 anytime available ako this week & pakialaman ko na basabasahin laman ng records. Be discreet lang daw baka may mata sa paligid.*"[16]

According to Gonzales, based on the foregoing messages, Geronimo's corruption was clearly established. He added that Geronimo also visited him in his home in Tanza, Cavite on several occasions and guaranteed a favorable decision. Geronimo even showed him supposed drafts of "decisions" which he claims he does at home and prints in the office to prevent "leakage." Geronimo commented that his aunt Judge does not trust people in Branch 89.[17]

Gonzales was taken aback when he learned thereafter that Monib's petition for bail was denied by the court. He then went immediately to Geronimo's house, but he could not find him there. Geronimo unfriended him from Facebook and even changed his mobile number. Gonzales then went to the Kapilya ng Iglesia ni Cristo, Tanza, Cavite, to file a complaint against Geronimo; however, the minister did not act on his complaint.[18]

Gonzales then realized that he was deceived by Geronimo and that there was no truth to any of his statements. Gonzales also learned that Geronimo deceived several people, but nobody bothered to step forward because Geronimo's wife allegedly holds a high position in the Office of the Provincial Prosecutor in Cavite.[19]

Gonzales also repeatedly demanded from Geronimo to return the amount given to him for Monib' s case. He even resorted to getting a lawyer to demand its return but to no avail.[20]

Thus, Gonzales averred that Geronimo should be held administratively liable. Gonzales's claims were corroborated by his witness/live-in partner Banta who also executed an Affidavit[21] in support of his complaint.

In his defense, Geronimo filed his verified Comment,[22] dated April 13, 2022, and claimed that the complaint was merely filed to dishonor and destroy his reputation. Geronimo identified Gonzales as a former law student who failed to complete his studies due to a pending criminal charge for murder filed against him.

Geronimo presented a different account of his initial encounter with Gonzales. He alleged that in April 2019, during a Sunday worship service at the local INC church in Tanza, Cavite, Gonzales approached him upon learning of his employment at the RTC. Gonzales bragged about maintaining a law office in Tanza, Cavite. Before parting ways, they exchanged contact numbers and social media information.[23]

Geronimo claimed that in April 2019, he contacted Gonzales via FB Messenger and asked if he can borrow PHP 5,000.00 for the repair of his car, but he was turned down. [24]

Geronimo stressed that he did not meet Gonzales in an auto shop on May 2, 2019, because it was a Thursday, a day of worship for INC members. It was on May 3, 2019, a Friday, when they met at the auto shop. His car was still undergoing repair and Gonzales offered him a ride. Along the way, they talked about a client (Monib) of Gonzales who has been in jail for about a year without a court trial. Gonzales then asked Geronimo if he has any contact in the courts of Bacoor City. Gonzales bragged about "It's all about money and money speaks in court." Geronimo found the statement insane. He then told Gonzales to seek the help of the concerned judge if Monib is a victim of injustice. Then Gonzales told him that the case was pending at the RTC, Imus City, Cavite, and Geronimo admitted on bragging that the executive judge of RTC, Imus City happens to be his aunt (Judge Hernandez-Azura). It was at this point when Gonzales asked if he could help Monib, who happens to be his client, too.[25]

Geronimo alleged that Gonzales was persistent and handed him documents relating to the case. Gonzales even told Geronimo that he controls the courts in Trece Martires, Cavite, including the judges, because he runs a law office.[26]

Geronimo was bothered by the persistent follow-ups of Gonzales. He felt that he was being exploited by Gonzales simply because he was borrowing money from him.[27]

Geronimo also received a message from Gonzales about a lawyer who was ambushed. The lawyer was not related to the case but Geronimo took it as a threat because Gonzales keeps guns in his car and travels with a bodyguard. Responding to the perceived threat, Geronimo sent photos showing him with a rifle and grenade on the background. The photo was only meant to show Gonzales that he was not bothered by the alleged threat.[28]

Geronimo also admitted to name-dropping Judge Hernandez-Azura, Fiscal Rivera of the Office of the City Prosecutor, and one Atty. Pami of the Public Attorney's Office to show Gonzales how things are supposed to work out relative to a criminal case.

Geronimo claimed that Gonzales has inadequate knowledge on remedial law.[29]

Geronimo disclosed that sometime in June 2021, before he borrowed money from Gonzales and received the same, the latter already bragged about having funds for the case of Monib and another case set to be raffled in Imus. Geronimo reminded him that he cannot just rely on his "contacts inside" but must adhere to the procedure and that Monib's case is non-bailable. Geronimo claimed that it was Gonzales who insisted that his approach/strategy will work.[30]

Geronimo further asserted that the Court should accord him recognition for exposing alleged corrupt practices within the Judiciary. He claimed that he mentioned the names of certain officials not for personal gain, but to safeguard the public interest and protect the integrity of the judges, with the ultimate aim of preventing the perpetuation of such misconduct.[31]

Geronimo also clarified that he did not change his number nor deactivate his Facebook account and that it was Gonzales who became inactive on social media. He claimed that Gonzales did not go to court with clean hands.[32]

Geronimo also denied that he wanted to set up a syndicate with Gonzales in the courts of Cavite. A syndicate cannot exist because each *sala* has its own judge who follows their own set of rules. A syndicate cannot thrive under this system.[33]

A Reply Affidavit (to the Comment)[34] was filed by Gonzales wherein he pointed out that Geronimo did not deny ownership of the Facebook Messenger and Facebook accounts where their exchanges were reflected. Gonzales further asserted that Geronimo's attempt to borrow money from him serves as additional proof of the existence of a personal relationship between them.

Gonzales found Geronimo's claim that he tried to take him for a ride to uncover people trying to corrupt the courts as unbelievable. He emphasized that it was Geronimo who made monetary demands from him.[35]

Gonzales further alleged that Geronimo mischaracterized the sum of PHP 115,000.00 as a personal loan, when the amount was in fact provided for the purpose of expediting the resolution of the Monib case. Such misrepresentation constitutes a clear violation of Republic Act No. 3019, otherwise known as the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act. [36] Geronimo was also said to have repeatedly boasted of his familial connection to Judge Hernandez-Azura, referring to her as "Tita Chay."[37] Gonzales asserted that he initiated the present Complaint to establish, particularly to his Muslim friend, Monib, that he did not misappropriate or personally benefit from the funds entrusted to him by Monib's family. He further claimed that, following the filing of this Complaint, he has been receiving death threats.[38]

Report and Recommendation of the JIB

In the Report and Recommendation[39] dated January 16, 2024, the Judicial Intregrity Board (JIB) found Geronimo guilty of gross misconduct and recommended that he be dismissed from the service with forfeiture of retirement benefits, except accrued leave credits, and with prejudice to reemployment in any branch or instrumentality of the government, including government-owned and controlled corporations.[40]

The JIB found the Complaint to be meritorious. The standard of proof required in an administrative proceeding was satisfied, establishing the commission of the administrative offense. The evidence substantiating Geronimo's culpability is unequivocal. Geronimo did not dispute his acquaintance with Gonzales, nor did he deny ownership of the social media accounts utilized in his communications with Gonzales concerning the Monib case and other related issues. Moreover, the aforementioned accounts remain active to date.[41]

Geronimo even came up with an outrageous excuse that he only took Gonzales on a "trip" or "ride" in order to expose the corruption in the courts. The name-dropping of several court personalities was said to be necessary to lure corrupt individuals like Gonzales to come out in the open.[42] Geronimo even has even the audacity to say that the Court should give him credit for coming up with such a scheme to lure out corrupt lawyers and individuals, thus painting himself as a savior in this circumstance.[43]

Furthermore, Geronimo accepted money from Gonzales and the message exchanges in their social media account showed that he was trying to expedite the case of Monib. Geronimo tried to pass off the money received as a "debt" rather than money for Monib's case. He also tried to make it appear that it is Gonzales who offered or bribed him and not the other way around.[44]

Clearly, the aforesaid actions of Geronimo show that he committed several violations of the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel,[45] particularly, Sections 1[46] and 2[47] of Canon I, thereof. Geronimo failed to meet the stringent standards governing the conduct of employees in the Judiciary.[48]

Issue

Whether or not respondent is guilty of the administrative infraction charged against him.

Court's Ruling

The Court adopts the recommendation by the JIB. The facts of the present case showed clearly that herein respondent committed grave misconduct in his dealings with complainant.

Canon I, Section 1 of the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel provides that a "court

personnel shall not use their official position to secure unwarranted benefits or exemptions for themselves or for others" while Section 2 of the same Canon, provides that "court personnel shall not solicit or accept any gift, favor, or benefit based on any explicit or implicit understanding that such gift, favor or benefit shall influence their official actions." In relation to this, Section 2(e), of Canon III states that "court personnel shall not . . . solicit or accept any gift, loan, gratuity, discount, favor, hospitality or service under circumstances from which it could reasonably be inferred that a major purpose of the donor is to influence the court personnel in performing official duties."

> In administrative proceedings, only substantial evidence, i.e., that amount of relevant evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion, is required. The standard of substantial evidence is satisfied when there is reasonable ground to believe that respondent is responsible for the misconduct complained of, even if such evidence might not be overwhelming or even preponderant.[49]

The act of respondent receiving money from complainant was clearly established in the instant case. Respondent claims that it was money he borrowed while Gonzales claimed that it was given for assistance in the case of Monib. For whatever reason, respondent's act of soliciting or receiving money constitutes a violation of the Code of Conduct of Court Personnel specifically Section 2 and punishable under Rule 140 of the Rules of Court.

As held in the case of *Villahermosa, Sr. v. Sarcia*,[50]

> In several cases, this court has held that the court personnel's act of soliciting or receiving money from litigants constitutes grave misconduct. The sole act of receiving money from litigants, whatever the reason may be, is antithesis to being a court employee.
>
> The Code of Conduct for Court Personnel requires that court personnel avoid conflicts of interest in performing official duties. It mandates that court personnel should not receive tips or other remunerations for assisting or attending to parties engaged in transactions or involved in actions or proceedings with the judiciary. ["]The Court has always stressed that all members of the judiciary should be free from any whiff of impropriety, not only with respect to their duties in the judicial branch but also to their behavior outside the court as private individuals, in order that the integrity and good name of the courts of justice shall be preserved.["] Court personnel cannot take advantage of the vulnerability of party-litigants.[51] (Citations omitted)

There is no defense in receiving money from party-litigants. The sole act of receiving money from litigants, whatever the reason may be, is antithesis to being a court employee. The act itself is not only inappropriate, but also constitutes grave misconduct.[52]

Thus, any justification or explanation provided by respondent for receiving the amount is irrelevant. What remains undisputed is his acknowledgment of having received the sum of PHP 115,000.00 from complainant. Such admission, by itself, suffices to establish his culpability for the misconduct. Their conversation reflected in FB Messenger which respondent also failed to deny making, not only weakened respondent's defense but bolstered complainant's claim that the money was for a certain case Respondent's action showed a clear violation of the ethical standard established by the Court. Integrity is an indispensable trait in the Judiciary. It is required from the judge to the lowest of its personnel. Court employees are held to the highest standards of morality and propriety in both their professional duties and private lives, in order to safeguard the honor and integrity of the Judicial institution.[53] The Court has consistently imposed disciplinary sanctions on personnel who fail to meet these exacting standards.

Further, the Court finds respondent's justification regarding his action outlandish and bizarre. He stated that he merely led on or made complainant believe that he could to do something with Monib's case. And that his action should have been recognized by the Court rather than being admonished as he was able to expose such corrupt act. His conduct is inconsistent with the principles and values upheld by the Court.

In addition, the Court also noted that respondent failed to offer any valid justification for naming specific individuals, making it seem as though they were involved in his case-fixing scheme.

The Court has consistently held that a court employee must steer clear of any situation which may cast even the slightest doubt in one's conduct.[54] Geronimo's conduct in the present case reflects an absence of good faith and has undermined, rather than reinforced, the Court's image as an institution that is incorruptible, impartial, and immune to undue influence. His actions have regrettably cast a shadow over the integrity of the Judiciary. For these reasons, respondent should be held accountable for grave misconduct.

Penalty

> Grave misconduct is defined as the transgression of some established and definite rule of action, more particularly, unlawful behavior or gross negligence by a public officer coupled with the elements of corruption, willful intent to violate the law or to disregard established rules. Corruption, as an element of grave misconduct, consists in the official or employee's act of unlawfully or wrongfully using his position to gain benefit for one's self. [55]

Under Section 17, paragraph 1 of Rule 140 of the Rules of Court, serious charges, which warrant a penalty of grave misconduct falls under, any of the following:

(a) Dismissal from service, forfeiture of all or part of the benefits as the Supreme Court may determine, and disqualification from reinstatement or appointment to any public office, including government-owned or -controlled corporations. *Provided, however*, that the forfeiture of benefits shall in no case include accrued leave credits;

(b) Suspension from office without salary and other benefits for more than six (6) months but not exceeding one (1) year; or

(c) A fine of more than [PHP] 100,000.00 but not exceeding [PHP] 200,000.00.[56]

Section 19(2) of the same Rule also recognizes the following modifying circumstances which aggravates the penalty to be imposed:

(a) Finding of previous administrative liability where a penalty is imposed, regardless of nature and/or gravity;

(b) Length of service facilitated the commission of the offense;

(c) Employment of fraudulent means to conceal the offense; and

(d) Other analogous circumstances.[57]

Grave misconduct merits dismissal.[58] In the case at bar, the Court finds it appropriate to impose the penalty of dismissal from the service upon respondent, not only due to the reprehensible nature of his conduct but also in view of his prior administrative offense,[59] simple misconduct, for which he was sanctioned with a fine amounting to PHP 18,000.00 with a stern warning that a repetition of the same shall be dealt with more severely.

The Court finds the above penalty proper because of the clear propensity of respondent to commit misconduct or transgress the law which prejudiced the interest and service of the courts. The Court has reminded those in the Judiciary service that they must maintain a high ethical standards in order to preserve the faith of the public in our Judicial system. Thus, they must stand as examples of responsibility, competence and efficiency, and they must discharge their duties with due care and utmost diligence being officers of the court and agents of the law. The Court shall not tolerate any misconduct that tarnishes the Judiciary's integrity.[60]

ACCORDINGLY, respondent Dwight Aldwin S. Geronimo, Sheriff IV, Branch 121, Regional Trial Court, Imus City, Cavite, is found **GUILTY** of grave misconduct and is **DISMISSED** from the service **IMMEDIATELY**, with **FORFEITURE** of all retirement benefits, except accrued leave credits, and with prejudice to his re-employment in any branch or agency of the government, including government-owned or controlled corporations.

SO ORDERED.

Gesmundo, C.J., Leonen, SAJ., Caguioa, Hernando, Lazaro-Javier, Inting, Zalameda, Gaerlan, J. Lopez, Dimaampao, Marquez, Kho, Jr., and *Villanueva, JJ.*, concur.

Rosario,[*] *J.*, on wellness leave.

Singh,[**] *J.*, on leave.

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[*] On wellness leave.

[**] On leave.

[1] *Rollo*, pp. 2-75.

[2] *Id.* at 2.

[3] *Id.*

[4] *Id.* at 2-3.

[5] *Id.* at 3.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.* at 11.

[8] *Id.* at 12.

[9] *Id.* at 13-15.

[10] *Id.* at 17.

[11] *Id.* at 4.

[12] *Id.* at 4, 18.

[13] *Id.* at 5, 19.

[14] *Id.* at 5, 20.

[15] *Id.* at 5, 21.

[16] *Id.* at 5, 22.

[17] *Id.* at 6, 34.

[18] *Id.* at 6.

[19] *Id.*

[20] *Id.* at 7.

[21] *Id.* at 71-752.

[22] *Id.* at 77-82.

[23] *Id.* at 78.

[24] *Id.*

[25] *Id.*

[26] *Id.* at 78-79

[27] *Id.* at 79.

[28] *Id.*

[29] *Id.*

[30] *Id.* at 79-80.

[31] *Id.* at 80.

[32] *Id.* at 81.

[33] *Id.* at 80-81.

[34] *Id.* at 101-107.

[35] *Id.* at 102.

[36] *Id.* at 103.

[37] *Id.*

[38] *Id.*

[39] *Id.* at 189-198.

[40] *Id.* at 198.

[41] *Id.* at 194.

[42] *Id.* at 194-195.

[43] *Id.* at 195.

[44] *Id.*

[45] A.M. No. 03-06-13-SC dated April 23, 2004.

[46] SECTION 1. Court personnel shall not use their official position to secure unwarranted benefits, privileges or exemptions for themselves or for others.

[47] SECTION 2. Court personnel shall not solicit or accept any gift, favor or benefit based on any or explicit understanding that such gift, favor or benefit shall influence their official actions.

[48] *Rollo*, p. 195.

[49] **Banaag v. Espeleta**, 677 Phil. 552, 559-560 (2011) [Per J. Perlas-Bernabe, *En Banc*].

[50] 726 Phil. 408 (2014) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].

[51] *Id.* at 416-417.

[52] **Cabauatan v. Uvero**, 820 Phil. 296, 304 (2017) [Per J. Peralta, Second Division].

[53] **In re Santos**, 516 Phil. 18, 21 (2006) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].

[54] **Villahermosa, Sr. v. Sarcia**, 726 Phil. 408, 417 (2014) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].

[55] **Fajardo v. Corral**, 813 Phil. 149, 158 (2017) [Per J. Tijam, Third Division].

[56] RULES OF COURT, Rule 140, sec. 17 as amended by A.M. No. 21-08-09-SC, February 22, 2022.

[57] A.M. No. 21-08-09-SC, sec. 19(2), February 22, 2022.

[58] **Ambrosio v. Delas Armas**, 869 Phil. 562, 572 (2020) [*Per Curiam*, *En Banc*].

[59] **Gonzales v. Geronimo, A.M. No. P-24-140**, July 30, 2024 [Per J. Gaerlan, *En Banc*].

[60] **Atty. Malibago-Satos v. Francisco, Jr.**, 787 Phil. 670, 682-683 (2016) [Per J. Leonen, *En Banc*].

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