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SECOND DIVISION

[A.M. No. MTJ-03-1507. January 20, 2004]
(formerly OCA IPI No. 00-914-MTJ)

CONCERNED CITIZENS OF SAN FRANCISCO, SURIGAO DEL NORTE, *petitioners, vs.* **HON. JUDGE JUANILLO M. PULLOS, Clerk of Court MANUEL D. GEALAN, Clerk of Court II ESMERALDA L. ANGOB, Stenographers I ROSARIO B. GASULAS & ALMEA B. PAYUSAN, Municipal Circuit Trial Court, San Francisco, Malimono, Surigao del Norte,** *respondents*.

SYNOPSIS

The concerned citizens of San Francisco, Surigao del Norte, accused Presiding Judge Juanillo M. Pullos and the employees of the Municipal Circuit Trial Court of San Francisco, Surigao del Norte, namely, Manuel D. Gealan, Esmeralda L. Angob, Rosario B. Gasulas and Almea B. Payusan of overcharging court clearances. In their respective answers, respondents denied the charges against them. When this case was referred to Executive Judge Floripinas C. Buyser for investigation, report and recommendation, the latter recommended that all respondents, except for Judge Pullos, have committed an act grossly prejudicial to the best interest of the service and recommended the imposition of the penalty of suspension for a period of six months and one day. The said recommendation was affirmed *in toto* by the Court Administrator, however, he recommended that the guilty respondents be suspended for one year for having committed an act of dishonesty.

The Court ruled that time and again, it has said that it condemns and would never countenance any conduct, act or omission on the part of all those involved in the administration of justice which would violate the norm of public accountability and would diminish or even just tend to diminish the faith of the people in the judiciary. Since the administration of justice is a sacred task, persons who are involved in it ought to live up to the strictest standard of honesty, integrity and uprightness. Respondents Gealan, Angob, Gasulas and Payusan were found to have committed acts of dishonesty and were suspended for

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one year without pay, while the case against Judge Juanillo M. Pullos was dismissed for lack of merit.

SYLLABUS

1. **POLITICAL LAW; ADMINISTRATIVE LAW; COURT PERSONNEL; DISHONESTY; OVERCHARGING OF COURT CLEARANCE FEES.** — We agree with the Court Administrator and the investigating judge that all the other respondents are guilty of dishonesty in overcharging complainants for court clearance fees. We have gone over the records of the case and found no cogent reason to disturb the factual findings of the investigating judge and the Court Administrator that the other respondents were positively identified by the complainants as the persons who charged the latter the amount of ₱50.00 or ₱30.00 each for court clearance but issued official receipts for a total amount of ₱10.00 only.

2. **REMEDIAL LAW; EVIDENCE; DENIAL; CANNOT PREVAIL OVER THE POSITIVE ASSERTIONS OF THE COMPLAINING WITNESSES.** — Respondent Payusan, Gasulas and Angob deny that they received money from complainants since only Minda Dapusala, a bonded officer, was the one allowed to receive payment. The testimony of Dapusala that she was the one who received the payments of complainant cannot outweigh the positive declarations of complainants that they gave their payments to the respondents who issued the receipts to them. Respondents' denial are at most lame and cannot prevail over the positive assertions of the complaining witnesses. In fact, on rebuttal, complainants Mata, Platil and Seguis testified that Dapusala was not in the courtroom when they secured their respective clearances thus she was not included in the herein charges. Moreover, if Dapusala was really the one who received the payments, she should have affixed her signature on the official receipts. However, as admitted by respondent Gasulas, her signature appeared in the receipts issued to complainants Elandag, Gordonas, Platil, Vicente Nimez and Mercy Nimez while respondent Payusan admitted having signed the official receipts issued to Mata and Seguis.

3. **POLITICAL LAW; ADMINISTRATIVE LAW; PUBLIC OFFICERS AND EMPLOYEES; COURT PERSONNEL; ORDINARY CITIZENS WOULD NOT BENEFIT FROM**

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HURLING SERIOUS ACCUSATIONS AGAINST COURT PERSONNEL. — It bears stress that complainants are mere ordinary citizens and would not benefit at all from hurling serious accusations against respondents who are court employees. The alleged refusal of respondents to accede to complainants' request to buy documentary stamp is too petty to move them to file this administrative case. Respondent Gasulas admitted that she allowed Lina Nimez to pay for in behalf of her absent husband Vicente who arrived later to affix his signature and thumb mark to the court clearance. Clearly, there was no reason for Nimez to be so angry with respondent Gasulas that would impel her to file an administrative complaint against Gasulas.

4. **ID.; ID.; EVIDENCE; CREDIBILITY OF WITNESSES; COMPLAINANTS NOT BEING ACTUATED BY ANY IMPROPER MOTIVE, THEIR TESTIMONIES ARE ENTITLED TO FULL FAITH AND CREDIT.** — There being nothing on the record to show that the complaints-witnesses were actuated by any improper motive, their testimonies shall be entitled to full faith and credit.

5. **POLITICAL LAW; ADMINISTRATIVE LAW; PUBLIC OFFICE; ONE'S BEING WELL-OFF IN LIFE IS NOT A GUARANTY THAT HE OR SHE WILL NOT COMMIT CORRUPTION IN PUBLIC OFFICE.** — We agree with the investigating Judge when he said that "one's being well-off in life is not a guaranty that he or she will not commit corruption in public office. History is fraught with public officials who were known to be moneyed but amassed more wealth by committing corruption in public office."

6. **ID.; ID.; CODE OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT FOR COURT PERSONNEL; PERSONS WHO ARE INVOLVED IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE OUGHT TO LIVE UP TO THE STRICTEST STANDARD OF HONESTY, INTEGRITY AND UPRIGHTNESS; VIOLATED IN CASE AT BAR.** — Time and again, we have said that we condemn and would never countenance any conduct, act or omission on the part of all those involved in the administration of justice which would violate the norm of public accountability and would diminish or even just tend to diminish the faith of the people in the judiciary. Since the administration of justice is a sacred task, persons who are involved in it ought to live up to the

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strictest standard of honesty, integrity and uprightness. Having committed acts of dishonesty, respondents Gealan, Angob, Gasulas and Payusan failed to measure up to these standards.

7. **ID.; ID.; COURT PERSONNEL; DISHONESTY; PENALTY.** — [A]s recommended by the Court Administrator, respondents Manuel D. Gealan, Esmeralda L. Angob, Rosario B. Gasulas and Almea B. Payusan, are found to have committed acts of dishonesty. They are suspended for one (1) year without pay, with warning that a repetition of the same or similar act in the future shall be dealt with more severely.

APPEARANCES OF COUNSEL

Noel P. Catre for respondents.

D E C I S I O N

AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, *J.*:

Before us is the letter complaint[1] filed by the Concerned Citizens of San Francisco, Surigao del Norte, accusing Juanillo M. Pullos, Presiding Judge of the Municipal Circuit Trial Court (MCTC) of San Francisco, Surigao del Norte; Manuel D. Gealan, Clerk of Court II; Esmeralda L. Angob, Clerk II; Rosario B. Gasulas and Almea B. Payusan, both Stenographers I, for allegedly overcharging complainants when the latter secured court clearances.

In their joint affidavit,[2] complainants Maria Lina O. Nimez, Mercy V. Nimez, Eleuterio M. Cordonas and Manuel Elandag allege: At around 10:30 a.m. of January 31, 2000, they were at the MCTC of San Francisco, Surigao del Norte, to secure court clearances for their loan purposes. Respondent court employees Angob, Gasulas and Payusan charged them ₱50.00 each per clearance but were issued two official receipts each in the amount of ₱8.00 court clearance JDF and ₱2.00 court clearance General Fund or for a total amount of only ₱10.00. Noting the discrepancy,

[1] *Rollo*, p. 16.

[2] *Id.* at pp. 18-19.

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complainants asked for clarification and they were told that the amount they paid allegedly covered the payment of three documentary stamps attached to each court clearance which was no longer indicated in the official receipts as it was in accordance with an office memorandum; still dissatisfied, complainants inquired from a BIR collection agent the cost of one documentary stamp and were told that each cost ₱5.00 thus the three documentary stamps attached to each court clearance amounted only to ₱15.00. When complainants confronted the respondents about the excessive collection fees, respondent Clerk of Court Manuel D. Gealan intervened and reasoned out that the fees were already fixed and approved by respondent Judge Juanillo M. Pullos.

In her affidavit,[3] complainant Filipina J. Platil aver: When she went to the MCTC on January 31, 2000 to secure a court clearance, she was also asked to pay ₱50.00 for the same. Around 12 o'clock noon of the same day, complainants Maria Lina and Mercy Nimez went to her store complaining about the excessive fees charged by respondents for their clearances. Maria Lina told her that the three documentary stamps cost only ₱15.00, thus the charge of ₱50.00 for the clearance was not justified. After the Nimezes left, she looked at her clearance and found no documentary stamps attached thereto despite her payment of ₱50.00.

In their joint affidavit,[4] complainants Caridad R. Seguis and Teresita L. Mata state: They went to MCTC on February 1, 2000 to secure court clearances when they saw Gregorio Embodo who told them that he was charged ₱50.00 for his clearance. When they were asked to pay ₱50.00 for each clearance, they only paid the amounts reflected in the two receipts issued to them for a total amount of only ₱10.00.

Respondent Judge Pullos filed his Comment[5] contending that he did not commit any violation of Republic Act No. 3019. He

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[3] *Id.* at p. 20.

[4] *Id.* at p. 21.

[5] *Id.* at pp. 32-33.

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claims that he issued Office Memorandum No. 2-99[6] on November 8, 1999 for the reason that applicants for court clearance refused to pay the amounts of ₱8.00 and ₱2.00 for the JDF and the General Fund claiming that the same should be free of charge, and they suspect that said amounts would only be pocketed by the court employees. Thus, he instructed his Clerk of Court that all payments for fees should be receipted and all applications for court clearance must be filed personally by the applicant and not by representatives. He also verbally instructed his court employees not to accept offers for merienda nor join get-together parties especially if sponsored by those who have transactions with their office which instructions were perceived by dirty minded individuals as lack of "*pakikisama.*" Respondent Judge further contends that some of herein complainants were close relative, friends and neighbors of the losing defendants in Civil Case No. 136, which he had decided and is now under execution; that because of his impartial administration of justice, he and his personnel will continue to acquire enemies. Respondent Judge Pullos also filed his counter-affidavit[7] reiterating his arguments in his comment and in addition states that there was no

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[6] *Id.* at p. 45. . . .

Court Clearance/s and documentation shall be issued personally to the person applying for the same but not through proxy or representative, whether the purpose is for employment, loan, business licenses and *etc*. To avoid problems with the BIR, require the applicant/s to affix the correct amount of documentary stamps, if it is required by law/rule/regulation. Henceforth, collect the correct amount for Judiciary Development Fund (JDF) and General Fund. Official Receipts/s should be issued for the amount collected and remit the same to the Supreme Court.

To avoid issuing documentation/clearance/s to a wrong party, ascertain the identity of the applicant (clearances) and in case of doubt, proper referral should be had with the Criminal Docket Book of the Court. Whenever convenient, require the party-applicant to produce his identification card or ID picture, let him affix his signature and/or thumb mark.

Regardless of color, creed, financial and political status of applicants, cause the immediate processing of their application/s and release the same at the earliest dispatch.

For compliance.

[7] *Id.* at pp. 43-44.

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overcharging or overpricing of whatever fees being collected as all collections/payments made to the court were duly receipted; that he did not intervene nor participate in the issuance of court clearance, much less, in the collection of fees.

In his Comment,[8] respondent Clerk of Court Gealan averred that complainants' accusation that he intervened and reasoned out that the fees were already fixed and were approved by Judge Pullos was a pure misconstruction of motives; that there was no need for the staff to consult him or the Presiding Judge for every receipt issued since Office Memorandum No. 2-99 dated 08 November 1999 is self-explanatory; that he signs the clearance if accompanied by original receipt, documentary stamp, signed and thumbmarked by the applicant; that court stenographer Dapusala was the one who received the fees collected since she was the one bonded by this Court; that he observed that Dapusala had not received more than what was reflected on the official receipts issued. He also filed his counter-affidavit[9] where he stated that the allegations that respondents committed corrupt practices by collecting excessive amount of fees is a big lie and quite impossible because all collections were duly receipted since Judge Pullos is very strict; that it is not their obligation to affix documentary stamps but required applicants to affix the same; that complainant Filipina Platil was a former stenographer of the court who resigned after she was recommended for dismissal by former Judge Adriano D. Barbero for inefficiency; that the instant administrative case could be a part of her vengeance to get even with the court employees; that Judge Pullos has nothing to do with the issuance of court clearances, more so with the collection of fees.

In her counter-affidavit,[10] respondent Angob alleges that as Clerk II, her work involved checking and verifying of entries in the docket book; that on January 31, 2000, she saw complainants Elandag, Gordonas, Mata and Sequis in the courtroom applying

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[8] *Id.* at pp. 38-39.

[9] *Id.* at pp. 40-41.

[10] *Id.* at pp. 52-53.

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for court clearances and she asked them to wait while she verified the criminal docket book; that they got angry and demanded that they be issued a clearance as they were not criminals; that she refused the application for clearance filed by Maria Lina Nimez in behalf of her husband, Vicente Nimez, Jr. since applications should be filed personally by the applicant; that the allegations against her were purely fabricated and intended to malign her reputation as a public servant.

In their joint counter-affidavit,[11] respondents Gasulas and Payusan allege that during their ten years and three years, respectively, in the judiciary, as stenographers, they have rendered good and honest service; that on January 31, 2000, they assisted in the preparation and issuance of court clearances upon the instruction of respondent Clerk of Court; that they deny having received from each applicant the amount of ₱50.00 but instead claim that they only received the amount of ₱8.00 for JDF and ₱2.00 for the General Fund as reflected in the receipts issued to them by Dapusala; that when they required complainants to produce documentary stamps since the BIR of San Francisco (Anao-on), Surigao del Norte, had no more documentary stamps, each complainant tried to give them ₱20.00 for them to buy stamps but because of their refusal to accept the money, complainants got angry and told them that they (respondents) were indifferent and arrogant; that respondent Clerk of Court had no hand in the collection of fees but merely a signatory of clearances and other documents requested; that Judge Pullos was very strict, considered by some people of San Francisco as indifferent.

All respondents declare that they are contented with their salaries, allowances and benefits received from the Court and would not barter the same with a few pesos that could malign their reputation and standing.

In our Resolution dated August 28, 2000, the case was referred to Executive Judge Floripinas C. Buyser of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 30, Surigao City, for investigation, report and

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[11] *Id.* at pp. 54-55.

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recommendation. A hearing was conducted by the investigating judge where both sides were heard.

The investigating judge submitted his report and recommendation dated June 28, 2002 where he found all respondents, except for Judge Pullos, to have committed an act grossly prejudicial to the best interest of the service and recommended the imposition of the penalty of suspension for a period of six months and one day, they being first offenders. He recommended the dismissal of the complaint against Judge Pullos for lack of evidence.

In the Resolution dated March 24, 2003, the case was referred to the Court Administrator for evaluation, report and recommendation. In his Report dated July 17, 2003, the Court Administrator agreed *in toto* with the findings and recommendations of the investigating judge but recommended that the guilty respondents be suspended for one year for having committed an act of dishonesty with warning that a repetition of the same or similar act in the future shall be dealt with more severely.

The case against respondent Judge Pullos should be dismissed for lack of evidence. No evidence was presented to show the respondent judge's culpability. In fact, all the complainants declared that respondent judge was not at the courtroom when they applied for their court clearances. The respondent judge did not commit any act that would point to his culpability except that as complainants had stated, he was merely included in the complaint because he was the chief of the court and because respondents were referring to his office memorandum as the basis for such overcharging. A reading of the said memorandum, however, only showed the requirements for securing clearance and other documents.

We agree with the Court Administrator and the investigating judge that all the other respondents are guilty of dishonesty in overcharging complainants for court clearance fees.

We have gone over the records of the case and found no cogent reason to disturb the factual findings of the investigating

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judge and the Court Administrator that the other respondents were positively identified by the complainants as the persons who charged the latter the amount of ₱50.00 or ₱30.00 each for court clearance but issued official receipts for a total amount of ₱10.00 only.

As correctly found by the investigating judge:

In the instant administrative case, substantial evidence exists linking respondents Rosario Gasulas, Almea Payusan, Esmeralda Angob and Manuel Gealan directly to the illegal exaction and corruption charged.

Complainant Filipina Platil positively identified respondent Rosario Gasulas as the very person from whom she secured a court clearance on 28 January 2000 (Exhibit "G"), for which Platil, upon Gasulas' demand, paid ₱50.00, but the latter gave the former two receipts in the total sum of only ₱10.00, broken down as follows: Clearance Gen. Fund, ₱2.00 (Exhibit "E"); and Clearance JDF, ₱8.00 (Exhibit "F").

Complainant Teresita Mata also positively identified respondent Rosario Gasulas as the person from whom she procured a court clearance on 1 February 2000. Gasulas charged Mata ₱30.00 which amount the latter paid to the former. Gasulas gave Mata two official receipts for the total amount of only ₱10.00 (Exhibits "C" and "D").

In regard to respondent Almea Payusan, complainant Filipina Platil positively declared that when she secured a court clearance on 31 January 2000, Payusan made her pay ₱50.00, but issued two official receipts for the total amount of only ₱10.00 (Exhibits "H" and "I"). Complainant Caridad Seguis likewise testified that respondent Almea Payusan charged her ₱30.00 for the court clearance Seguis secured on 1 February 2000, but because Payusan issued two official receipts for the total amount of only ₱10.00, Seguis paid only ₱10.00 and not the ₱30.00 charged by said respondent.

Relative to respondent Esmeralda Angob, complainant Maria Lina Nimez pointed at her as the one from whom the latter secured a court clearance on 31 January 2000, for which Nimez paid ₱35.00 but was issued official receipts for the total amount of only ₱10.00 (Exhibits "L" and "M"). Nimez further declared that Angob told her that "there is a secret receipt for the payment of the paper being used."

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In fact, from the testimony of complainant Eleuterio Gordonas, it appears that respondents Rosario Gasulas, Esmeralda Angob and Manuel Gealan conspired in overcharging Gordonas for the court clearance he secured on 31 January 2000. Gordonas declared that, at that time, Angob told him to pay ₱50.00 for the clearance, which demand Gealan affirmed by saying that the same is in consonance with the new memorandum issued by respondent Judge Juanillo M. Pullos. Hence, Gordonas paid ₱50.00 to Gasulas and the latter gave him two official receipts for the sums of only ₱8.00 and ₱2.00, respectively (Exhibits "J" and "K").

Respondents Rosario Gasulas, Esmeralda Angob and Almea Payusan admitted having issued official receipts for payment of court clearance fees (Exhibits "5", "6", "7", "8", "10", "11", and "12", respectively), but denied having personally received the money paid, as according to them they are not authorized to do so, they being not bonded. They claimed that the money paid for the court clearances was actually received by Court Stenographer Minda Dapusala who was the duly designated Collection Officer and the one who is bonded. Despite the fact that this assertion of the aforenamed respondents is corroborated by Minda Dapusala herself, the undersigned Investigating Judge is not convinced. First, because the denial by the said respondents that they received the money paid for such court clearances, cannot prevail over the positive declaration by the complainants that the money paid by them were in fact received by the same respondents (see: *People vs. Geraban,* G.R. No. 137048, 24 May 2001); and, second, because the veracity of the testimony of Minda Dapusala that she is duly designated Collection Officer of the MCTC of Malimono-San Francisco, Surigao del Norte is doubtful, she having not declared who particularly designated her to perform that additional duty. Despite the testimony of respondent Manuel Gealan that "I requested the Supreme Court to let Daposala (*sic*) as the one to collect the fees." (t.s.n. 7 January 2002, p. 6), Dapusala has not presented any Supreme Court order designating her as Collection Officer of the aforesaid Municipal Circuit Trial Court. According to Section 8, Rule 141, as amended by Supreme Court Administrative Circular No. 11-94, the person authorized to collect fees in the Municipal Trial Court is the Clerk of Court, who, in the instant case, is respondent Manuel Gealan. He is the accountable officer and, thus, required to be bonded (Sec. 3, Rule 141, Revised Rules of Court, as amended). In fact, complainants Teresita Mata, Filipina Platil and Caridad Seguis testified on rebuttal that it was not Minda Dapusala who received their payment for the court

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clearance, as she was not there at that time, for which reason Dapusala is not included as one of the respondents in this administrative case. Said complainants' respective payments were received by respondents Payusan and Gasulas.

Notably, complainants Gordonas and Elandag who were outraged by the excessive clearance fees collected on them on January 31, 2000, immediately thereafter went to the office of the Sangguniang Bayan located beside the MCTC and approached Kagawad Proceso Bernal and complained about the fees collected in the amount of ₱50.00 but were covered by official receipts in the amount of ₱10.00.[12] Kagawad Bernal then referred the matter to their Vice Mayor.[13] The following day, Vice Mayor Japson together with Romeo Tomate of the DILG and all Sangguniang Bayan members were there at the courtroom, thus, complainant Mata who went to MCTC to secure her court clearance on that day and was asked to pay ₱30.00 was secretly called by respondent Gasulas to return her ₱20.00.[14]

Respondents Payusan, Gasulas and Angob deny that they received money from complainants since only Minda Dapusala, a bonded officer, was the one allowed to receive payment.

We are not persuaded. The testimony of Dapusala that she was the one who received the payments of complainant cannot outweigh the positive declarations of complainants that they gave their payments to the respondents who issued the receipts to them. Respondents' denial are at most lame and cannot prevail over the positive assertions of the complaining witnesses. In fact, on rebuttal, complainants Mata, Platil and Seguis testified that Dapusala was not in the courtroom when they secured their respective clearances thus she was not included in the herein charges. Moreover, if Dapusala was really the one who received the payments, she should have affixed her signature on the official receipts. However, as admitted by respondent Gasulas, her signature appeared in the receipts issued to

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[12] TSN, March 12, 2001, p. 5.

[13] TSN, May 22, 2001, p. 8.

[14] TSN, November 6, 2000, p. 23.

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complainants Elandag, Gordonas, Platil, Vicente Nimez and Mercy Nimez[15] while respondent Payusan admitted having signed the official receipts issued to Mata and Seguis.[16]

Respondents claim that the complainants had ill-motives in filing the administrative case because (a) respondents refused complainant's request for them to buy the documentary stamps which should be affixed in the clearance; (b) Lina Nimez was mad as respondents refused her filing of application in behalf of her absent husband; (c) complainants wanted that their clearances be released immediately; (d) Platil has a grudge against respondents since she thought that they were responsible for her removal from the court as stenographer.

The reasons cited are so flimsy. It bears stress that complainants are mere ordinary citizens and would not benefit at all from hurling serious accusations against respondents who are court employees. The alleged refusal of respondents to accede to complainants' request to buy documentary stamp is too petty to move them to file this administrative case. Respondent Gasulas admitted that she allowed Lina Nimez to pay for in behalf of her absent husband Vicente who arrived later to affix his signature and thumb mark to the court clearance.[17] Clearly, there was no reason for Nimez to be so angry with respondent Gasulas that would impel her to file an administrative complaint against Gasulas.

There is likewise no merit to respondent Payusan's claim that complainants were angered by the fact that they wanted that their clearances be released immediately. Respondent Payusan herself testified on cross-examination that complainants Platil and Mata, who filed their applications on the last day of filing, were issued their clearances on the same day they filed the same.[18]

The removal of complainant Platil from office in 1989 could not have been the reason for filing the administrative case since

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[15] TSN, November 5, 2001, pp. 5-12.

[16] *Id.* at pp. 20-21.

[17] TSN, November 5, 2001, p. 9.

[18] TSN, November 5, 2001, p. 24-25.

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she categorically declared that only respondent Gealan was employed with the court at the time that she was severed from office.[19] She even stressed in rebuttal that she was not angry with Judge Barbero who recommended her dismissal nor with respondent Gealan who asked her to sign her resignation papers because she knew that Gealan was only following the judge's instruction.[20] Thus, she had no reason to begrudge the other respondents who had nothing to do at all with her resignation.

Respondent Angob claims that complainant Seguis was motivated by a personal grudge against her because her daughter had slapped Seguis' daughter. Angob testified that the alleged slapping incident happened two or three years ago and she learned about it only from relatives after Seguis had filed the affidavit-complaint;[21] that no criminal case was brought against her daughter nor was the incident brought before the *barangay* captain.[22] Thus, it is quite unbelievable that such slapping incident which had nothing to do with the charge of overcharging of fees would be the reason of Seguis for filing an administrative complaint against respondent Angob. In fact, Seguis did not point to respondent Angob as the one who overcharged her but to respondent Payusan who even testified that she knew the complainants personally and had no quarrel with them.

Respondent Angob also tried to discredit complainant Mata by alleging that the latter was a trouble maker because she led the petition to oust their parish priest. However, on rebuttal, Mata stated that the parish priest left the parish on his own volition.[23] Other than this single incident which was not even proven and which respondent Angob's knowledge of the same came only from others,[24] respondent could not offer a more valid reason why Mata would accuse her of overcharging clearance fees.

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[19] TSN, February 20, 2001, p. 8.

[20] TSN, February 19, 2002, 8.

[21] TSN, November 26, 2001, pp. 10-11.

[22] *Id.*, at p. 12.

[23] TSN, February 19, 2002, p. 4.

[24] TSN, November 26, 2001, p. 13.

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There being nothing on the record to show that the complaints-witnesses were actuated by any improper motive, their testimonies shall be entitled to full faith and credit.[25]

Respondents would like to impress upon us that they would not commit the act of overcharging since they are contented with the remuneration and benefits they received from the Court. We are not convinced. We agree with the investigating Judge when he said that "one's being well-off in life is not a guaranty that he or she will not commit corruption in public office. History is fraught with public officials who were known to be moneyed but amassed more wealth by committing corruption in public office."

Time and again, we have said that we condemn and would never countenance any conduct, act or omission on the part of all those involved in the administration of justice which would violate the norm of public accountability and would diminish or even just tend to diminish the faith of the people in the judiciary.[26] Since the administration of justice is a sacred task, persons who are involved in it ought to live up to the strictest standard of honesty, integrity and uprightness. Having committed acts of dishonesty, respondents Gealan, Angob, Gasulas and Payusan failed to measure up to these standards.

WHEREFORE, as recommended by the Court Administrator, respondents Manuel D. Gealan, Esmeralda L. Angob, Rosario B. Gasulas and Almea B. Payusan, are found to have committed acts of dishonesty. They are suspended for one (1) year without pay, with warning that a repetition of the same or similar act in the future shall be dealt with more severely.

The case against Judge Juanillo M. Pullos is *DISMISSED* for lack of evidence.

SO ORDERED.

Puno (Chairman), Quisumbing, Callejo, Sr. and *Tinga, JJ.*, concur.

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[25] *People vs. Flores*, 252 SCRA 31.

[26] *Bandong vs. Ching*, 261 SCRA 10.