



Republic of the Philippines
Supreme Court
Manila

EN BANC

SUPREME COURT OF THE PHILIPPINES
P. I. O. / COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

RECEIVED
JUL 14 2025
BY: [Signature]
TIME: [Signature]

VITTORIO C. ROMERO,
Complainant,

A.C. No. 9272
[Formerly CBD Case No. 12-3503]

- versus -

ATTY. LEO C. ROMERO,
Respondent.

Present:
GESMUNDO, C.J.,
LEONEN,
CAGUIOA,*
HERNANDO,
LAZARO-JAVIER,
INTING,
ZALAMEDA,
GAERLAN,
ROSARIO,
LOPEZ,
DIMAAMPAO,
MARQUEZ,
KHO, JR.,
SINGH,** and
VILLANUEVA, JJ.

Promulgated:

July 29, 2025

x-----[Signature]-----x

DECISION

PER CURIAM:

For the Court's resolution is the Affidavit-Complaint¹ dated October 8, 2011 filed before the Court by complainant Vittorio C. Romero (Vittorio) against respondent Atty. Leo C. Romero (Atty. Leo) which seeks the latter's disbarment.

* On official business.

** On leave.

¹ Rollo, pp. 1-68.

The Facts

Vittorio alleged that he and Atty. Leo are brothers, and that the latter committed numerous acts constituting gross misconduct as a member of the Bar. Vittorio described such acts as follows:

First, in 1997, Atty. Leo was among the defense counsels in a rape case. Atty. Leo asked Vittorio to accompany him to talk to one of the private prosecutors, Atty. Remedios C. Balbin (Atty. Balbin), to which Vittorio agreed. Upon arriving at the private prosecutor's office, Vittorio was shocked that Atty. Leo attempted to offer the aggregate amount of PHP 10 million, with PHP 5 million going to the private complainant, PHP 3 million to Atty. Balbin, and PHP 2 million to Atty. Leo as "mediator." When Atty. Balbin flatly refused, Atty. Leo told Vittorio to use his connections as a film director to blackmail Atty. Balbin into accepting the offer. When Vittorio refused this offer as well, Atty. Leo cursed him and vowed that he will have to pay a heavy price for his failure to cooperate.²

Second, Atty. Leo repeatedly physically assaulted Vittorio, thereby causing the latter to file criminal complaints against Atty. Leo. In addition, it has been Atty. Leo's habit to always ask requests from Vittorio, and when the latter is unable to accede, the former would disturb Vittorio in his workplace; send correspondences to various film production companies to besmirch his reputation; and even hurt him, all of which contributed to the decline of his career as a film director.³

Third, Atty. Leo caused the filing of various sham cases against Vittorio, such as: (a) a petition for guardianship claiming that Vittorio is incompetent, seeking that Atty. Leo be appointed as his guardian in an effort to take control of his properties; (b) a case for annulment of sale and nullification of titles which was dismissed; (c) multiple complaints for sexual abuse purportedly committed by Vittorio against numerous purported victims, all of which were either Atty. Leo's domestic employees or had some form of connection with him.⁴

Fourth, in connection with the complaints for sexual abuse, Atty. Leo sent Vittorio a series of text messages wherein Atty. Leo essentially said the following: (a) lambasted Vittorio for his homosexuality; (b) told Vittorio that his comeuppance will arrive with the filing of sexual abuse cases against him; and (c) posited that

² *Id.* at 5-8.

³ *Id.* at 10-11, 55-60.

⁴ *Id.* at 10-30.

Vittorio's homosexuality is a sickness, and as such, Vittorio should seek professional and medical help.⁵

Fifth, Atty. Leo attempted to forcibly take custody of their mother, Aurora Romero (Aurora), when the latter was still alive, to take control of her properties and other assets. According to Vittorio, Atty. Leo even filed a petition for *habeas corpus* to obtain custody of Aurora, and once under his custody, he forced Aurora to reveal her US dollar deposits and various jewelries. Vittorio said that Aurora even filed criminal complaints for serious illegal detention, frustrated murder, and grave threats against Atty. Leo, which Atty. Leo was able to have dismissed after forcing Aurora to sign an affidavit of desistance. Furthermore, due to Atty. Leo's acts, Aurora was constrained to: (a) release a Press Statement⁶ dated November 14, 2007 and write a letter⁷ dated March 28, 2007 addressed to the Philippine National Police Provincial Director of Pangasinan, Police Senior Superintendent Isagani R. Nerez (PSSupt. Nerez), where she detailed the abuses that she, Vittorio, and their domestic employees received under the hands of Atty. Leo; and (b) put in her Last Will and Testament⁸ that Atty. Leo should not be allowed inside her wake when she dies.⁹

To end his Complaint, Vittorio asserted that Atty. Leo's acts have failed to uphold the integrity and dignity of the legal profession, and as such, he should be disbarred.¹⁰

In defense, Atty. Leo submitted a Comment¹¹ dated February 24, 2012 essentially denying all the allegations against him. According to Atty. Leo: (a) he was not a defense counsel in the rape case that Vittorio was talking about, and that if there is truth to the bribery attempt in 1997, then an administrative disciplinary complaint should have been instituted against him back then; (b) Vittorio's allegations of him being hurt by Atty. Leo are mere products of Vittorio's creative mind as an experienced personality in cinema and television; (c) the filing of the guardianship petition was due to his good faith belief that Vittorio should immediately seek medical treatment, lest he would cause irreparable damage and injury to other persons; and (d) his mother, Aurora, is already dead, and as such, there is no way to confirm or deny what Vittorio "has put into her lips."¹²

⁵ *Id.* at 31–34.

⁶ *Id.* at 229–232.

⁷ *Id.* at 235–238.

⁸ *Id.* at 160–162.

⁹ *Id.* at 161–162.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 66–67. *See also* pp. 101–104.

¹¹ *Id.* at 246–273.

¹² *Id.* *See also* pp. 482–483.



In a Resolution¹³ dated April 23, 2012, the Court *inter alia* referred the matter to the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) for investigation, report, and recommendation.

The IBP Report and Recommendation

In a Report and Recommendation¹⁴ dated June 5, 2013, the IBP-Commission on Bar Discipline (CBD) recommended that Atty. Leo be found administratively liable for violating Canon 1, Rule 1.02 and 1.03; Canon 7, Rule 7.03; Canon 10, Rule 10.01 and 10.03; and Canon 12, Rule 12.07 of the Code of Professional Responsibility (CPR), and accordingly, be meted with the penalty of suspension from the practice of law for a period of three years, with a stern warning that a repetition of the same or similar acts shall be dealt with more severely.¹⁵

In so ruling, the IBP-CBD found substantial evidence to conclude that Atty. Leo violated the aforementioned provisions of the CPR when he committed the following: *first*, attempted to bribe the private prosecutor in the rape case that Vittorio was pertaining in his Complaint; *second*, took advantage of his legal knowledge by causing the filing of fabricated criminal cases—all filed by his employees—against Vittorio; *third*, filed a baseless petition for guardianship against Vittorio even if he knew that there was nothing medically or mentally wrong with him; *fourth*, filed an equally baseless *habeas corpus* petition to gain custody of Aurora, and upon gaining the same, compelled her to reveal her US dollar deposits; *fifth*, committed various acts which led Aurora to (a) file criminal cases for serious illegal detention, grave threats, and frustrated murder against him, all of which he was able to have dismissed by forcing Aurora to file an affidavit of desistance, (b) issue a press statement detailing the ordeal she suffered from Atty. Leo, and (c) write in her last will and testament that Atty. Leo should be prohibited from attending her wake when she dies.¹⁶

On the other hand, the IBP-CBD found untenable Atty. Leo's denials as they were glaringly without corroborative evidence.¹⁷

In a Resolution¹⁸ dated June 5, 2015, the IBP-Board of Governors (BOG) adopted and approved the IBP-CBD's findings and recommendations *in toto*. Atty. Leo moved for reconsideration, but the IBP-BOG denied the

¹³ *Id.* at 377.

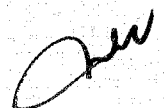
¹⁴ *Id.* at 478–486. The June 5, 2013 Report and Recommendation was submitted by Integrated Bar of the Philippines-Investigating Commissioner Honesto A. Villamor.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 485–486.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 483–486.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 484–485.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 478.



same through a Resolution¹⁹ dated May 27, 2019. Undaunted, Atty. Leo filed a Rule 45 Petition for Review²⁰ before the Court.

The Issue Before the Court

The issue before the Court is whether Atty. Leo should be held administratively liable for the acts complained of.

The Court's Ruling

The Court adopts the findings and recommendations of the IBP-CBD with modifications, as will be explained hereunder.

I.

Prefatorily, it is important to note that on April 11, 2023, the Court *En Banc* unanimously approved A.M. No. 22-09-01-SC or the Code of Professional Responsibility and Accountability (CPRA), repealing the CPR, Sections 20 to 37 of Rule 138, and Rule 139-B of the Rules of Court. Section 3 of the General Provisions of the CPRA states that it “shall take effect fifteen (15) calendar days after its publication in the Official Gazette or any newspaper of general circulation.” The CPRA was published in the Philippine Star and Manila Bulletin on May 14, 2023, and hence, already effective on May 30, 2023.²¹

In this relation, Section 1 of the General Provisions of the CPRA states that it “*shall be applied to all pending and future cases, except to the extent that in the opinion of the [Court], its retroactive application would not be feasible or would work injustice, in which case the procedure under which the cases were filed shall govern.*”

In view of the foregoing, the Court shall resolve this case under the framework of the CPRA, to the extent that it is applicable.

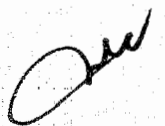
II.

Before the Court tackles the substantive issues of this case, it is well to note that Atty. Leo contended in his Motion for Reconsideration before the IBP Board and his supplement that the instant Complaint should be dismissed due to Vittorio's failure to: (a) appear at the scheduled hearings; (b) file a

¹⁹ *Id.* at 614.

²⁰ *Id.* at 696–731.

²¹ See *Request of the Public Attorney's Office to Delete Section 22, Canon III of the Proposed Code of Professional Responsibility and Accountability*, 944 Phil. 15, 16, (2023) [Per J. Singh, *En Banc*].



Position Paper; and (c) rebut the defenses he set forth in his Comment and Position Paper.²²

This contention is without merit.

Time and again, it has been repeatedly held that administrative disciplinary proceedings against members of the Bar are *sui generis* in nature, the principal aim of which is to determine whether the lawyer concerned is still fit to be entrusted with the duties and responsibilities pertaining to the office of an attorney. It is recognized that in this type of proceedings, there is no private interest involved and there is likewise no redress for private grievance as it is undertaken and prosecuted solely for the public welfare and for preserving the courts of justice from the official ministration of person unfit to practice law. Given this backdrop, the complainant is deemed as a mere witness.²³ In *Felix v. Gadon*,²⁴ the Court had the opportunity to elucidate:

It is well settled that disbarment proceedings are *sui generis* in nature. Their very nature sets them apart from ordinary criminal and civil actions. Hence, the rules on civil actions do not necessarily apply to disbarment cases. The case of *Gonzalez v. Atty. Alcaraz* is enlightening on this matter:

Well-established is the rule that administrative cases against lawyers belong to a class of their own. These cases are distinct from and proceed independently of civil and criminal cases. In *In Re Almacén*, the Court discoursed on this point thus:

[D]isciplinary proceedings [against lawyers] are *sui generis*. Neither purely civil nor purely criminal . . . [they do] not involve . . . a trial of an action or a suit, but [are] rather investigation[s] by the Court into the conduct of its officers. Not being intended to inflict punishment, [they are] in no sense a criminal prosecution. Accordingly, there is neither a plaintiff nor a prosecutor therein. [They] may be initiated by the Court *motu proprio*. Public interest is [their] primary objective, and the real question for determination is whether or not the attorney is still a fit person to be allowed the privileges as such. Hence, in the exercise of its disciplinary powers, the Court merely calls upon a member of the Bar to account for his actuations as an officer of the Court with the end in view of preserving the purity of the legal profession and the proper and honest administration of justice by purging the profession of members who by their misconduct have prove[n] themselves no longer worthy to be entrusted with the duties and responsibilities pertaining to the office of an attorney[.]

²² See *rollo*, pp. 490, 511–512.

²³ See *Laurel v. Delute*, 880 Phil. 474, 489 (2020) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*]. (Citations omitted)

²⁴ 951 Phil. 620 (2024) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].

As a unique action designed to keep lawyers accountable to the Court and to the public, the lack of a real party-in-interest will not hamper the Court's exercise of its disciplinary power to mete out the necessary penalty to erring lawyers. In *Mejares v. Atty. Romana*, the Court said in no uncertain terms:

The IBP Investigating Commissioner correctly dismissed, for lack of merit, respondent's claim that complainant is not a real party-in-interest in this case. Complainant, being a member of the Union that retained respondent as its counsel, possesses the requisite interest to file this complaint as she is directly prejudiced by respondent's misconduct. At any rate, the procedural requirement observed in ordinary civil proceedings that only the real party-in-interest must initiate the suit does not apply in disbarment cases, thus:

The argument . . . that [a] complainant [in disbarment proceedings] has no legal personality to sue is unavailing. Section 1, Rule 139-B of the Rules of Court provides that proceedings for the disbarment, suspension, or discipline of attorneys may be taken by the Supreme Court *motu proprio* or by the Integrated Bar of the Philippines upon the verified complaint of any person. The right to institute a disbarment proceeding is not confined to clients nor is it necessary that the person complaining suffered injury from the alleged wrongdoing. Disbarment proceedings are matters of public interest and the only basis for judgment is the proof or failure of proof of the charges. The evidence submitted by complainant before the Commission on Bar Discipline sufficed to sustain its resolution and recommended sanctions.²⁵ (Citations omitted)

Verily, Vittorio's failure to participate in the proceedings will not *ipso facto* result in the dismissal of his complaint against Atty. Leo. The Court may still consider other pieces of evidence submitted during the entire proceedings to determine Atty. Leo's administrative liability.

III.

In *In re: Gadon*,²⁶ the Court reiterated that in administrative disciplinary proceedings, the respondent-lawyer is called to answer not only for their acts/omissions in their official capacity as a lawyer, but also those done in their private dealings, viz.:

What Atty. Gadon fails to realize is that lawyers, as Section 2 of Canon II provides, are expected to avoid scandalous behavior, whether in public or private life. This is reiterated in Sections 3 and 4 of the same Canon, which respectively prohibit the creation or promotion of an unsafe or hostile environment, *both in private and public settings*, and command the use of dignified, gender-fair, child- and culturally-sensitive language in

²⁵ *Id.* at 632.

²⁶ 943 Phil. 27 (2023) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].

all personal and professional dealings. The Court has consistently reminded lawyers that they cannot segregate their public life from their private affairs. In *Velasco v. Causing*, the Court emphasized:

First, a lawyer is not allowed to divide his personality as an attorney at one time and a mere citizen at another. Regardless of whether a lawyer is representing his client in court, acting as a supposed spokesperson outside of it, or is merely practicing his right to press freedom as a “journalist-blogger,” his duties to the society and his ethical obligations as a member of the bar remain *unchanged*.

In *Belo-Henares v. Guevarra*, the Court stressed its ruling in *Pobre v. Defensor-Santiago*, that lawyers may be held administratively liable even for their conduct supposedly committed in a private capacity:

Lawyers may be disciplined even for any conduct committed in their private capacity, as long as their misconduct reflects their want of probity or good demeanor, a good character being an essential qualification for the admission to the practice of law and for continuance of such privilege. *When the Code of Professional Responsibility or the Rules of Court speaks of conduct or misconduct, the reference is not confined to one's behavior exhibited in connection with the performance of lawyers' professional duties, but also covers any misconduct*, which—albeit unrelated to the actual practice of their profession—would show them to be unfit for the office and unworthy of the privileges which their license and the law invest in them.

That Atty. Gadon failed to see that he cannot set apart his professional acts from his private life indicates that he does not fully understand the responsibilities that come with the legal profession. His utterances alone, even if intended only for Robles, are reprehensible in themselves. That he did not intend to release the subject video clip on social media does not make it less abhorrent.²⁷ (Emphasis supplied, citations omitted)

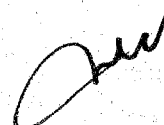
This finds application in this case, considering that Vittorio's accusations against his own brother, Atty. Leo, not only pertains to his acts as a lawyer, but also to his acts as a private citizen.

Prescinding therefrom and upon a circumspect review of the records of this case, the Court finds substantial evidence²⁸ to conclude that Atty. Leo violated Canon II, Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 of the CPRA, which respectively read:

²⁷ *Id.* at 46–48.

²⁸ See CODE OF PROF. RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY, Canon VI, sec. 32 which reads:

SECTION 32. *Quantum and Burden of Proof.* — In administrative disciplinary cases, the complainant has the burden of proof to establish with substantial evidence the allegations against the respondent. Substantial evidence is that amount of relevant evidence which a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to justify a conclusion.



CANON II
Propriety

A lawyer shall, at all times, act with propriety and maintain the appearance of propriety in personal and professional dealings, observe honesty, respect and courtesy, and uphold the dignity of the legal profession consistent with the highest standards of ethical behavior.

SECTION 1. *Proper Conduct.* — A lawyer shall not engage in unlawful, dishonest, immoral, or deceitful conduct.

SECTION 2. *Dignified Conduct.* — A lawyer shall respect the law, the courts, tribunals, and other government agencies, their officials, employees, and processes, and act with courtesy, civility, fairness, and candor towards fellow members of the bar.

A lawyer shall not engage in conduct that adversely reflects on one's fitness to practice law, nor behave in a scandalous manner, whether in public or private life, to the discredit of the legal profession.

SECTION 3. *Safe Environment; avoid all forms of abuse or harassment.* — A lawyer shall not create or promote an unsafe or hostile environment, both in private and public settings, whether online, in workplaces, educational or training institutions, or in recreational areas.

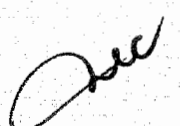
To this end, a lawyer shall not commit any form of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse or violence against another person. A lawyer is also prohibited from engaging in any gender-based harassment or discrimination.

SECTION 4. *Use of dignified, gender fair, and child- and culturally-sensitive language.* — A lawyer shall use only dignified, gender-fair, child- and culturally-sensitive language in all personal and professional dealings.

To this end, a lawyer shall not use language which is abusive, intemperate, offensive or otherwise improper, oral or written, and whether made through traditional or electronic means, including all forms or types of mass or social media.

SECTION 5. *Observance of Fairness and Obedience.* — A lawyer shall, in every personal and professional engagement, insist on the observance of the principles of fairness and obedience to the law.

To further elucidate, the Court shall now discuss the acts constituting such violations.



Atty. Leo is administratively liable for corruption when he attempted to bribe the private prosecutor in a rape case

As aptly pointed out by the IBP-CBD, there is clear evidence that Atty. Leo attempted to bribe the private prosecutor in a rape case that he handled. In this regard, the Court takes mandatory judicial notice²⁹ of the affidavit executed by such private prosecutor, considering that the same was cited in full in the Concurring and Dissenting Opinion of Justice Reynato S. Puno in *Alonte v. Hon Savellano, Jr.*³⁰ As may be gleaned from said Opinion, the affidavit reads:

I, Remedios C. Balbin, of legal age, Filipino, married, with residence at #5 Uranus Street, Congressional Avenue Subdivision, Quezon City, after having duly sworn in accordance with law, depose and say:

1. That I am the Private Prosecutor in Criminal Case No. 96-19-B for rape, filed with the Biñan RTC, Branch 25, entitled 'People of the Philippines vs. Bayani Arthur Alonte, et al.';

2. That as Private Prosecutor, it is my avowed duty to be faithful to the interests of my client, Ms. Juvie-Lyn Punongbayan;

3. That on several occasions, I was visited at my Office at the Quezon City Hall Compound, by a lawyer who introduced himself as Atty. Leo C. Romero, representing the Accused Mayor Bayani Arthur Alonte;

4. That my calendar at the People's Bureau, Quezon City Hall, shows that *he came to see me about eight (8) times, but we talked only about three (3) times* because I was always busy attending to the problems of Quezon City's urban poor and the landowners of private properties illegally occupied by them;

5. That in two (2) occasions, Atty. Romero conveyed to me the message of Mayor Alonte, namely, to drop the rape case against him, and that he would give a consideration of Ten Million Pesos (P10 Million) to be apportioned as follows:

Five Million Pesos (P5M) — for the Private Complainant
Three Million Pesos (P3M) — for me as Private Prosecutor
Two Million Pesos (P2M) — for him as the mediator

6. That I explained to Atty. Romero that *money does not matter at all to the Complainant and her family even if they have very modest*

²⁹ REV. RULES ON EVIDENCE, Rule 129, sec. 1 which reads:

Section 1. *Judicial notice, when mandatory.* - *A court shall take judicial notice, without the introduction of evidence, of the existence and territorial extent of states, their political history, forms of government and symbols of nationality, the law of nations, the admiralty and maritime courts of the world and their seals, the political constitution and history of the Philippines, official acts of the legislative, executive and judicial departments of the National Government of the Philippines, the laws of nature, the measure of time, and the geographical divisions.* (Emphasis supplied)

³⁰ 350 Phil. 700 (1998) [Per J. Vitug, *En Banc*].

means; that they want justice, which means a conviction for the charge of rape;

7. That I also explained to Atty. Romero that the money he was offering me was of no consequence to me because I had access to the resources of my two (2) daughters, both of whom are in the medical field abroad, and of Mr. Filomeno Balbin, Labor Attache then assigned in Riyadh;

8. *That I told him that I cannot be tempted with his offer because spiritual consideration are more important to me than the material.* Also, that I usually handle cases *pro bono* (at abunado pa) where the litigant is in dire need of legal assistance but cannot afford to pay for the lawyer's fees, as in Juvie-lyn's case;

9. That I gave Atty. Romero a copy of the decision of the Supreme Court promulgated December 10, 1996, entitled "People of the Philippines vs. Robert Cloud" (GR No. 119359; Crim. Case No. Q-90-12660) for parricide involving the death of a 2 1/2 year old boy. I wrote on page one of the xerox copy of the decision: "To Atty. Leo Romero — so you will understand," and to which I affixed my signature;

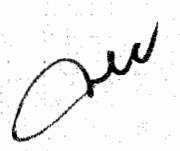
10. *That I told him explicitly: 'we cannot simplify the entire proceedings. You advise Mayor Alonte to surrender (one mitigating circumstance), plead guilty (another mitigating circumstance), get a conviction and suffer the corresponding penalty. Otherwise, we have nothing to talk about.'*;

11. That I emphasized that his suggestion for Mayor Alonte to plead guilty to 'act of lasciviousness' merely was ridiculous;

12. That when the Complainant's Affidavit on the offer of Ms. Emily Vasquez for a valuable consideration in exchange for an affidavit of desistance in the rape was exposed by media, Atty. Romero came to see me and thanked me for not exposing him in similar fashion. I assured him that he will not be an exception and that I was just too busy then to execute an affidavit on the matter, as I do now;

13. That I have not received other similar offers of valuable material consideration from any other person, whether private party or government official. However, I have been separately advised by several concerned persons that I was placing my personal safety at great risk. The victim's family will have great difficulty in finding another lawyer to 'adopt' them in the way I did, which gives them strength to pursue their case with confidence and the accused Mayor is aware that I am the obstacle to an out-of-court settlement of the case. Also, that I had my hands full, as it is, as the Head of the QC People's Bureau, Housing Development Center, and Special Task Force on Squatting and Resettlement, and the numerous cases filed by me or against me, connected with my performance of official duties, and I should not add more legal problems despite my authority to engage in private law practice; and

14. *That this affidavit is executed in order to put on record the attempt to influence me directly, in exchange for valuable consideration to drop the rape charge against Mayor Bayani Arthur Alonte.*



February 24, 1997, City of Manila.³¹

A plain reading of the affidavit readily shows that the private prosecutor positively and categorically declared that it was Atty. Leo who attempted to bribe her with the aggregate amount of PHP 10 million, to be apportioned among the private complainant, the private prosecutor, and Atty. Leo himself, in exchange for the private prosecutor convincing the private complainant to execute an affidavit of desistance against the accused. Notably, Atty. Leo never discussed this matter in his Comment. While he traversed this for the first time in his Motion for Reconsideration before the IBP, he only did so in passing, and merely maintained that the accusation against him over what happened years ago is uncorroborated, unsubstantiated, and cannot be made as basis for a finding of guilt against him.³² To the Court, Atty. Leo miserably failed to rebut the allegations against him, and as such, he must be held administratively liable for the serious offense of corruption under Canon VI, Section 33(c) of the CPRA.

Atty. Leo committed gender-based sexual discrimination against Vittorio

Records show that Atty. Leo has a bitter disdain against Vittorio due to the latter's gender identity. This is evinced by a series of text messages that the former sent to the latter, to wit:

TEXT EXHIBIT - A

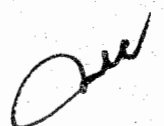
From: Atty. Leo Romero (09102436997)
Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 30/09/2007
Time: 1:47 am

Dito na LALANTAD ang tunay mo pagka tao. Talagang BABOY KANG BAKLA. NAKAKAHNA KA. Puro KABAKLAAN AT KABABUYAN ang pinag gagawa mo sa kanila. TSUPA TSUPA AT TUSOK TUSOK SA PUWIT. NAKAKADIRI KA. NAPAKA DUMI MONG TAO. DIREK ito na PINAKAMALAKI MONG PUBLICITY NA MANGYAYARI SA BUHAY MO. PAGHANDAAN MO. PAGKATAPOS nito, kailanman hindi mo na magagawa pa na isoli ang buhay na hiniram mo sa PANGINOON. Dahil AKO na mismo ang magsosoli sa PANGINOON sa buhay na hiniram mo. Kalabisan na ang ginawa mo sa aming lahat, lalong lalo na sa MAMA. Hindi na maka tao at hindi na rin maka DIYOS. Kaya dapat ka nang YUMAO. PERO ipadadama ko muna sa iyo ang PINAKAMALUPIT NA DAGOK na MANGYAYARI SA BUHAY MO. AT TINITIYAK KO SA IYO NA HIND MO NA KAKAYANIN PA. DIREK, KARMA NA ITO SA BUHAY MO.

³¹ *Id.* at 733-735.

³² *See rollo*, p. 491.



TEXT EXHIBIT – B

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09102436997)
Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date:
30/09/2007
Time: 1:01 am

DIREK, Dumating na rin ang oras na mararamdaman mo ang mga karma na darating sa buhay mo. Dahil sa ginawa mong paninira at kasinunganlingan ginawa mo sa amin. Pero ngayon lahat ng mangyayari sa buhay mo ay totoo. Harapin mo ang mga bintang nila sa iyo sa korte at huwag kang tumakbo. Tatlo pa lang sila ngayon. Pero lalabas na silang lahat para ilantad ang lahat ng KABABUYANG (TSUPA TSUPA) ginawa mo sa kanilang LAHAT. PAGDUSAHAN MO. Lahat demanda sa iyo TOTOO. Handa na sila lahat na HINALAY MO. (TSUPA TSUPA MO) mga BOYLETS ng malabobo, pakalat, aguilar, cenpelco. Nasa akin na lahat ang kanilang totoong sinumpaang salaysay nila. notaryado na. Gusto ko subukan mo silang puntahan at kumbinsihin na umatras laban sa iyo para mapatunayan mo sa sarili mo, na hindi mo na sila kayang pumanig at maniwala pa sa iyo. Kahit takutin at mag maka awa ka pa sa kanila. Sa labanang ito WALA KA NANG KAWAGI WAGI.

TEXT EXHIBIT -- C

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)
Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 18/07/2007
Time: 10:34 pm

Karma. Karma. Karma. Alis ka ng [P]ilipinas kasi marami na galit sa iyo. No. 1 si Lord. Tapos dami pa. Bakla ka kasi kaya ganyan. Sa katawan mo, wala man lang gahibla na para sa lalaki. Para sa babae lahat. Pakita mo ito sa lahat, bakla. Karma.

TEXT EXHIBIT - D

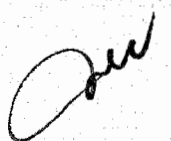
From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)
Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 30/06/2007
Time: 8:15 am

KARMA. KARMA. KARMA. The noose on your neck is tightening. I believe the boys have pleaded to [M]other [L]ily for legal assistance and might tap alentajan to handle the case. So, you will be in the limelight again. I know this is what you crave for. Publicity all over the media news and print. It may resurrect your dead career. Good luck. Seems that after spending millions of money of mama and unlawfully using her in almost 20 cases not 1 has been elevated.

TEXT EXHIBIT – E

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)



Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 27/06/2007

Time: 6:16 am

The law of karma is fast catching up on you. You may not know it but a lot of boys who claimed that you have sexually ravaged them have come to me for legal help to file cases against you. I begged off due to our relationship. They said they will look for other lawyers. String of bad luck are coming your way. KARMA. KARMA. Even your lawyer is dipping his fingers already. It appears that he is the financier. Look at the complaint affidavit of David.

TEXT EXHIBIT - F

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)

Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 26/06/2007

Time: 10:19 am

Ang karma dumarating sa buhay. Kapatid, maaga dumating sa iyo kasi dian na yan pagka panganak mo. Pero di pa huli, kasi puede pa tayo punta sa doctor. Samahan kita.

TEXT EXHIBIT - G

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)

Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 26/06/2007

Time: 8:57 pm

I know that it is really difficult for one to have questioned gender. I do not want you to live and die not knowing where to place your gender. But it is not late. Seek professional medical and psychiatric help. Who knows, you will be properly gendered after your treatment. Kindly follow my advice.

TEXT EXHIBIT - H

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)

Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)

Date: 26/06/2007

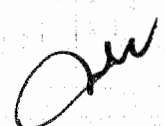
Time: 8:46 pm

Sana nagging[sic] babae ka para masunod mo lahat ang gusto mong gawin sa buhay. Kaso naging lalake ang pagkatao mo. Ang hirap talaga sitwasyon mo. Pero pagamot ka dahil may pagasa pa yan. Tulong ako sa mga gamot mo. Sabihin mo rin sa korte ang mga problema mo. Makakatulong sila. Good luck. I cannot call you by any other name.

TEXT EXHIBIT - I

From: Atty. Leo Romero (09159379266)

Sent to: Vittorio Romero (09178487880)



Date: 19/06/2007

Time: 12:20 pm

I am sorry bro. You are confused. You do not even know what your real gender is. Look at you. You are not even half a man. So what are you. As a brotherly advise, seek professional and medical help so that you can properly determine your gender. Your atuations are no manly at all. Kindly get some help. Your situation is getting worse. You want to be a man but you cannot even be half a man. You want to be something else but it is not possible at the moment.³³

As Vittorio stated in his Affidavit Complaint, these text messages shows that Atty. Leo “detests and hates [him], his own brother, so much that [Atty. Leo] minced no words in humiliating and threatening [him], trying to break [his] spirit.”³⁴

Furthermore, Atty. Leo admitted in his Comment that he indeed filed a petition for guardianship over Vittorio “[i]n an honest and generous effort to prevent him from doing further damage and injury to himself and to other persons including his siblings and relatives and to treat and confine him in a medical institution for possible infection of the dreaded HIV and/or AIDS illnesses which may have adversely affected his physical, mental[,] and spiritual being and to treat his mental and psychological conditions and, possibly, drug related addictions.”³⁵

It bears reiterating that “[i]n both words and actions, lawyers must act with dignity and honor, as the standard of conduct for those in the legal profession is higher than that of ordinary persons.”³⁶ Lamentably, Atty. Leo miserably failed in this regard when he, through the foregoing acts, had subjected Vittorio to, *inter alia*, verbal and psychological abuse and violence just because of the latter’s gender identity. As this cannot be countenanced, the Court finds sufficient basis to find Atty. Leo administratively liable for gender-based sexual discrimination under Canon VI, Section 33(k) of the CPRA.

Atty. Leo’s acts against his own mother, Aurora, constitutes grossly immoral conduct

Insofar as Atty. Leo’s purported acts against Aurora is concerned, it is well to recall that Vittorio accused Atty. Leo of employing machinations to gain custody of Aurora for the purpose of taking control of her assets and properties before her passing.³⁷ On the other hand, in his Comment and

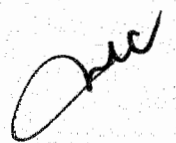
³³ *Rollo*, pp. 31–34.

³⁴ *Id.* at 34.

³⁵ *Id.* at 258.

³⁶ *Felix v. Gadon*, 951 Phil. 620, 628 (2024) [*Per Curiam En Banc*].

³⁷ *See rollo*, pp. 29–30, 45–55, 61–62.



Motion for Reconsideration before the IBP, Atty. Leo tried to paint a picture that it was Vittorio who was desperate to retain custody of Aurora so that the latter could gain a monopoly over her assets and properties.³⁸

The Court observes, however, that the evidence on record, particularly, the documents Aurora executed before she passed away—namely the Press Statement³⁹ dated November 14, 2007, the letter⁴⁰ dated March 28, 2007 addressed to the PSSupt. Nerez, and her Last Will and Testament⁴¹—all shed light on what really transpired within their family during her waning years.

Pertinent portions of the Press Statement read:

It now pains me, however, that my eldest son, whom I had dreams of becoming a great lawyer, has turned out to be my greatest disappointment. Worse, I fear him for my life. He has already threatened me, and I know that he is capable of ending my earthly existence just so he can have everything I own for himself.

On April 15, 2007, I was forcibly taken from my Petron Gasoline Station in Mangatarem, Pangasinan by my son Atty. Leo C. Romero and brought to his home in Quezon City. When I was taken, I did not even have with me my hypertension medication, my mayordoma, my reading glasses, and decent clothing. I had nothing on me except my house clothes.

I was forced to spend the night at the home of my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero, and was brought to the Court of Appeals the next day for a hearing on a petition for Habeas Corpus case he had earlier filed.

....

I have never been detained against my will by anyone, most especially by my son Vittorio, in whom I have taken refuge many times in the past few years because of the abuses which my son Atty. Leo C. Romero has committed against me over and over again.

....

During my involuntary stay at the home of my son Atty. Leo C. Romero, I was coerced by his wife JOY into revealing my bank accounts – among them a dollar account with the Citibank Savings Bank, Katipunan Branch, in Quezon City.

Upon learning of the Citibank dollar account, my son Atty. Leo C. Romero and his wife JOY, had me withdraw my FOREIGN CURRENCY TIME DEPOSITS, and had the said amount transferred to his own account.

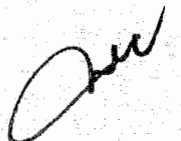
During my detention, I was forced by my son Atty. Leo C. Romero to sign various documents, among them a “Withdrawal of Complaint” and

³⁸ *Id.* at 249–255, 489–490.

³⁹ *Id.* at 229–232.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 235–238.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 160–162.



an "Affidavit of Desistance" which he used to have complaints I had earlier filed against him dismissed. I was forced to sign many documents because of his threat never to release me if I did not oblige him.

I was also brought to Pangasinan on two occasions, but I was always under guard by his wife JOY. She gave me medicines that made me vomit and sleepy all day. There, I was made to swear before the Prosecutor's Office on the Withdrawal of Complaint and the Affidavit of Desistance I was forced to sign. Both times I asked that I be left in Pangasinan, but my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero and his wife JOY would not heed my pleas.

It was only after he got my money and after I signed various documents did my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero release me. His threats still echo in my mind: he said he would not stop until he gets all my money and my property.

Prior to my kidnapping, I had filed many cases against my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero, for he had physically hurt me, robbed me, threatened and tried to kill me and sued me falsely. I could not take any more of his abuses and this is why I decided to file one case after another against him, hoping that the law would catch up on his evil deeds and I may live the remaining years of my life in peace.

Just late last year during the wake of my sister, my son Atty. Leo C. Romero pushed me twice, hurt me painfully, and threatened me, saying: "*PAPATAYIN KITA AT ANAK MONG SI VITT!*"[.]

.....

In fact, after the April 15, 2007 kidnapping, my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero, had attempted at least two times to kidnap me once again, once in my Xavierville residence and another in Pangasinan, when I was going to see my lawyer in Dagupan City[.]

.....

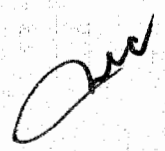
I cannot understand why my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero, has chosen to rob me of the few remaining years of my life, and why he deprives me of the tranquil existence that I deserve. I have worked hard to give my children a stable and good life. And I believe that I am now entitled to enjoy the rest of my years and be happy with my grandchildren, living in peace, harmony and contentment with my family.

While it pains me to expose my son, Atty. Leo C. Romero, this way, I cannot help but still feel responsible for him. As a mother, I cannot allow him to continue in his ways, otherwise, I will be encouraging his evil ways.⁴²

On the other hand, portions of Aurora's letter to PSSupt. Nerez state:

I am writing you this letter as a helpless, desperate 76 year-old lady seeking for police assistance and intervention in the continuing series of

⁴² *Id.* at 229-232.



violent attacks made not only on my person but also on my loved ones and loyal employees.

The grave coercion and death threats are being committed against us by ATTY. LEO ROMERO and DAVID ROMERO in the business operation of my PETRON gasoline station in Mangatarem, Pangasinan, the security of my residence in the same town, and management of the A.C. Romero Enterprises construction machineries, heavy equipment, and vehicles.

....

I have come to you SIR for I have nobody in greater authority to protect us with the full force of Law. I am respectfully requesting for humanitarian assistance, and I know your good office, Director Nerez, has a soft heart and compassion for a suffering senior citizen like me.

For your information, there is much to FEAR about the evil capabilities of ATTY. LEO ROMERO. He is a dangerous person. For the past 15 years he has battered us with devious misdeeds. He has swindled me and my son VITTORIO so much money and fortune. His greed to own money which does not belong to him is beyond measure. Late last year he worsened his mental, verbal and physical attacks on us, which we rightfully filed and complained in the courts of law.

....

When the Malasique PNP forces came to our rescue at the time ATTY. LEO and DAVID attempted to KILL my son Vittorio, it became such a BIG issue for them. When was it wrong and illegal to seek police assistance when one's life is in danger?

For the record, it was myself, with the assistance of my lawyer ATTY. FRANCISCO BARAAN, who sought the help of the Malasique PNP with the aim to avert ATTY. LEO and DAVID's attempted MURDER on myself and my son Vittorio.

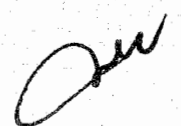
....

I therefore respectfully request that you help me bring about the TRUTH of the matter and enlighten the PNP forces in Mangatarem that ATTY. LEO and DAVID ROMERO must stop their continuing grave coercions on myself, my loved ones, and my workers.

SIR, I would appreciate your kindness and understanding to help me achieve a more tranquil, and peaceful life. I am 76 years-old. The emotional pressure and mounting tension wrecked upon me by ATTY. LEO and DAVID are too much to bear.

I have suffered too much already. Hirap na hirap na po ako sa kanilang kasakiman. I do not have much time left on earth to wait for the courts of law to finally RULE that my wayward sons be taken away from my LIFE. I yearn that my precious days left in this world is experienced with a bit of sweetness, grace and serenity.

....



I BEG of you then to spare me a little of your warmth and understanding. Please HELP PREVENT ATTY. LEO and DAVID ROMERO from further attacking and inflicting personal, professional, mental, and physical injuries on my person as well as my employees. I plead you to STOP them from further hurting and terrorizing me and my son Vittorio. At 76 years of age, I plead you to help me find solace in a better, trouble-free environment so I can happily enjoy the twilight years of my life.⁴³

Finally, in her Last Will and Testament, Aurora gave the following instructions:

I respectfully order my children to follow my instructions, and I forbid them NOT to disapprove or stop the plans that I have made. I am writing this WILL so as to attest that my FINAL orders be recognized and respected.

....

I have requested and instructed the officers and security forces of the Heritage Memorial Park to help my son VITTORIO execute the memorial plans and services for me and his father DANTE.

Most important, I have asked them to ensure the safety and life of VITTORIO while inside the grounds of the Heritage Memorial Park during all ceremonies involving my future funeral arrangement and internment.

For the record, there were instances in the past that I have been an EYEWITNESS to life threatening acts of violence committed against Vittorio by his brothers ATTY. LEO C. ROMERO and DAVID C. ROMERO. They almost killed Vittorio many times in the past. So I plead to the management of the Heritage Memorial Park to safeguard the life of VITTORIO during my future services in their premises, and to kindly provide him with SECURITY assignments.

....

As there is irreconcilable CONFLICT in the family and to avoid any untoward or violent incidents that may arise, I FORBID the presence and participation in the future internment by my two (2) other children, namely; ATTY. LEO C. ROMERO and DAVID AMANDO C. ROMERO, their SPOUSES and CHILDREN. I forbid their presence inside the premises of the Heritage Memorial Park at all times for the entire duration of my internment. Atty. Leo and David Amando, who have inflicted to me so much pain and sorrow, have NO AUTHORITY whatsoever with respect to any of the future funeral arrangement and my internment. I have given instructions and orders to the management of the Heritage Memorial Park NOT to ALLOW their ENTRY and participation. My decision and will is FINAL and irrevocable.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Rollo*, pp. 235-238.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 160-162.



It is often said that a mother's love for her child is the purest form of love known to mankind. As English writer and novelist Agatha Christie puts it: "A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity. It dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."⁴⁵ Despite this truism, Aurora was constrained to divulge the ordeal she suffered at the hands of her own firstborn son, Atty. Leo. Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that there is substantial basis to conclude that Atty. Leo indeed committed the aforesaid acts listed by Aurora, as no loving mother would expose her own child's wrongdoing—and consequently expose such child to any criminal, civil, and/or administrative liability—if what she is saying has no semblance of truth.

In this relation, case law instructs that "[a] grossly immoral act is one the extent of which is so corrupt to constitute a criminal act, or grossly unprincipled as to be reprehensible to a high degree or committed under circumstances so scandalous and revolting as to shock the common sense of decency. An act to be considered grossly immoral shall be willful, flagrant, or shameless, as to show indifference to the opinion of good and respectable members of the community."⁴⁶

Given this definition, the Court views Atty. Leo's commission of a series of acts often bordering (if not already constituting) criminal acts against his own mother only showed Atty. Leo's moral indifference to the opinion of the good and respectable members of the community. Verily, Atty. Leo's actions amount to utter disrespect to the very person who gave birth to him, raised him, and sent him to law schools in abroad for him to better his career as a lawyer—all to secure for himself his mother's assets and properties upon her passing. For these, Atty. Leo should be found administratively liable for grossly immoral conduct under Canon VI, Section 33(f) of the CPRA.

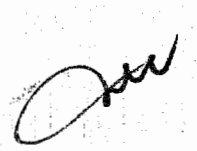
IV.

Atty. Leo's administrative liabilities having been established by substantial evidence, the Court now proceeds to determine the penalties to be meted on him.

As already adverted to, corruption, gender-based sexual discrimination, and grossly immoral conduct are all serious offenses under Canon VI, Section 33 of the CPRA. Relatedly, Canon VI, Section 37 of the CPRA provides that serious offenses are punishable by any of the following, or a combination of, by the following penalties: (a) disbarment; (b) suspension from the practice of law for a period exceeding six months; (c) revocation of notarial commission

⁴⁵ Goodreads, *Agatha Christie, Quotes*, available at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/53061-a-mother-s-love-for-her-child-is-like-nothing-else> (last accessed on May 30, 2025).

⁴⁶ *Saldares v. Saldares*, 934 Phil. 933, 940 (2023) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].



and disqualification as notary public for not less than two years; and/or (d) a fine exceeding PHP 100,000.00.

Significantly, Canon VI, Section 40 of the CPRA reads:

SECTION 40. *Penalty for multiple offenses.* — If the respondent is found liable for more than one (1) offense arising from separate acts or omissions in a single administrative proceeding, the Court shall impose separate penalties for each offense. Should the aggregate of the imposed penalties exceed five (5) years of suspension from the practice of law or [PHP] 1,000,000.00 in fines, the respondent may, in the discretion of the Supreme Court, be meted with the penalty of disbarment.

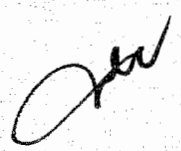
If a single act or omission gives rise to more than one (1) offense, the respondent shall still be found liable for all such offenses, but shall, nonetheless, only be meted with the appropriate penalty for the most serious offense.

Applying the foregoing in this case, it is well to point out that Atty. Leo's aforesaid offenses of corruption, gender-based sexual discrimination, and grossly immoral conduct arose from different sets of acts, and as such, should be penalized separately. Given the obtaining circumstances of this case, Atty. Leo ought to be penalized with suspension from the practice of law for a period of two years for *each* offense. On this score, since the aggregate period of suspension from the practice of law exceeds five years, the Court deems it appropriate to convert the same to the supreme penalty of disbarment.

As a final note, the Court wishes to reiterate this stern reminder to all members of the legal profession: "[lawyers], of all classes and professions, are most sacredly bound to uphold the law. The privilege to practice law is bestowed only upon individuals who are competent intellectually, academically and, equally important, morally. As such, lawyers must at all times conduct themselves, especially in their dealings with their clients and the public at large, with honesty and integrity in a manner beyond reproach. There is no room in this noble profession for misogyny and sexism. The Court will never tolerate abuse, in whatever form, especially when perpetrated by an officer of the court."⁴⁷

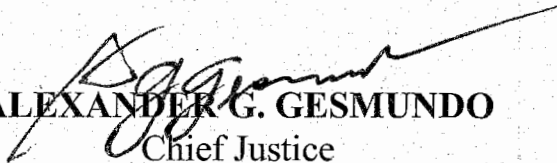
ACCORDINGLY, the Court finds respondent Atty. Leo C. Romero **GUILTY** of violation of Canon II, Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the Code of Professional Responsibility and Accountability, which in turn, constitutes the grave offenses of corruption, gender-based sexual discrimination, and grossly immoral conduct. He is **DISBARRED** from the practice of law and his name is ordered **STRICKEN OFF** the Roll of Attorneys, **EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY**.

⁴⁷ *In re: Gadon*, 943 Phil. 27, 53–54 (2023) [*Per Curiam, En Banc*].

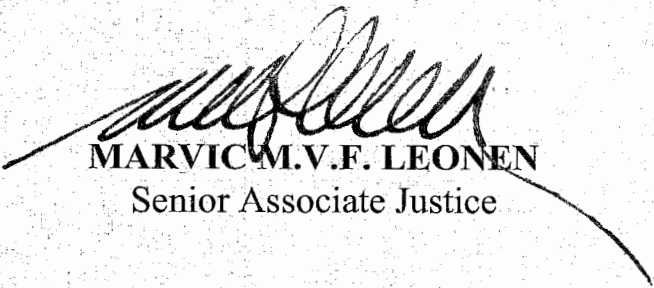


Let copies of this Decision be furnished to the following: (1) the Office of the Bar Confidant to be appended to respondent Atty. Leo C. Romero's personal record as a member of the Bar; (2) the Integrated Bar of the Philippines for its information and guidance; (3) the Office of the Court Administrator for circulation to all courts in the country; and (4) the Department of Justice.

SO ORDERED.

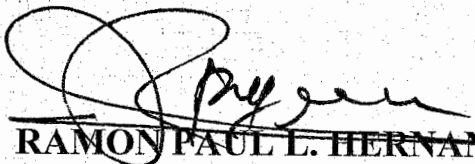


ALEXANDER G. GESMUNDO
Chief Justice

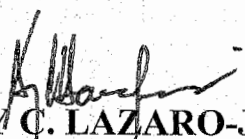


MARVIC M.V.F. LEONEN
Senior Associate Justice

On official business
ALFREDO BENJAMIN S. CAGUIOA
Associate Justice



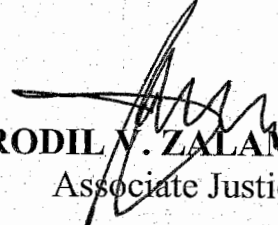
RAMON PAUL L. HERNANDO
Associate Justice



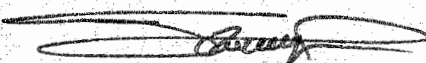
AMY C. LAZARO-JAVIER
Associate Justice



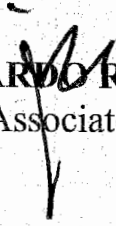
HENRI JEAN PAUL B. INTING
Associate Justice



RODIL V. ZALAMEDA
Associate Justice



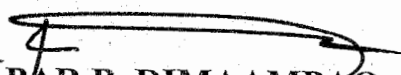
SAMUEL H. GAERLAN
Associate Justice



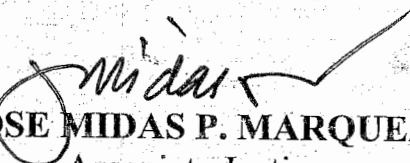
RICARDO R. ROSARIO
Associate Justice



JHOSEP V. LOPEZ
Associate Justice



JAPAR B. DIMAAMPAO
Associate Justice

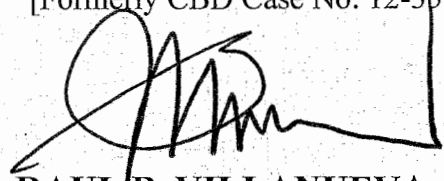


JOSE MIDAS P. MARQUEZ
Associate Justice



ANTONIO T. KHO, JR.
Associate Justice

On leave
MARIA FILOMENA D. SINGH
Associate Justice



RAUL B. VILLANUEVA
Associate Justice