



REPUBLIC OF KENYA

IN THE HIGH COURT OF KENYA

AT KITUI

(Coram: Odunga, J)

CRIMINAL CASE NO. 25 OF 2019

REPUBLIC.....PROSECUTOR

VERSUS

MBITI MUNGUTI.....ACCUSED

RULING

1. The accused herein, **Mbiti Munguti**, faces the charge of Murder contrary to section 203 as read with section 204 of the **Penal Code** (Cap 63) Laws of Kenya for which a plea of not guilty was entered. The particulars of the charge were that on the 9th July, 2019 at Mwendwa Village, Kalivu Location of Ikutha Sub county within Kitui County, murdered **Fredinah Kanini Mwendwa**.
2. The accused has applied to be released on and/or admitted to bail/bond on reasonable terms pending the hearing and final determination of this case.
3. According to the accused, his rural home is at Ikutha Location, Ikutha Sub County Kitui where he resides within his extended family carrying out farming activities. He averred that he is a reasonable family man with a wife and children and has fixed abode which he will not leave until the case is heard and determined and that he resides within the jurisdiction of the court and is ready to be reporting to the Investigating Officer should the bod terms require so. According to him, the community from where he hails is not against him and as such there are no threats to his life and he is ready and willing to participate in the trial till the end. He was apprehensive that due to COVID 19 pandemic that has led to the closure of the courts to the members of the public, there is no determinate period when the hearing of the case shall commence.
4. The accused denied participating in the death of the deceased and averred that he was not within the vicinity of the area at the time of the alleged offence hence did not fear the trial. He disclosed that he had relatives who were willing to stand surety for him since he was not a flight risk.
5. The application was opposed by the prosecution vide a replying affidavit sworn by **Cpl Jonathan Shirenjo**, the investigating officer. According to him, the accused was a resident of Ikutha Sub County and had an extended family as claimed in his affidavit. He however averred that the case had overwhelming evidence connecting the accused to the murder of the deceased as there were eye witnesses who saw the accused committing the offence. According to the deponent, there were threats over the life of the accused from the members of the community hence he should not be admitted to bail. It was disclosed that witnesses had been threatened with one of then reporting a threatening report from the accused person should he get out. Further reports from the area assistance chief confirmed that the family and relatives of the deceased had occasionally reported threatening reports from the accused person hence there was heightened tension from the members of the public.
6. According to the deponent, the accused was a flight risk in that after committing the crime, he manoeuvred to cross to Tanzania and was arrested at Illasit Area which borders Tanzania. It was therefore his view that the motive of the application was to enable the accused disappear without the family of the deceased getting justice hence the objection to his release on bail.

Determination

7. I have considered the application, the affidavits both in support thereof and in opposition thereto as well as the submissions made.
8. Article 49(1)(h) of the Constitution provides that:-

An accused person has the right ...

(h) to be released on bond or bail, on reasonable conditions pending a charge or trial, unless there are compelling reasons not to be released.

9. The Constitution however has not identified what qualifies under the term “compelling reasons.” The ordinary meaning according to *Thesaurus English Dictionary* of the word “compelling” is forceful, convincing, persuasive, undeniable and gripping. From this plain meaning it is apparent that the court would consider any fact or circumstances brought to its attention by the prosecution which would convince the court that the release of the accused would not augur well for the administration of justice or for the trial at hand. The court would therefore in my view consider the circumstances of each case using commonly known criteria, primary of which is whether or not the accused will attend trial.

10. It is true that the right to bail is not absolute and where there are compelling reasons the said right may be restricted. Nevertheless, since the Constitution expressly confers the said right, it is upon the prosecution to show that there exist compelling reasons to deny an accused person bail. What the compelling reasons are, however, depend on the circumstances of each case and these circumstances are to be considered cumulatively and not in isolation. The mere fact therefore that the offence with which an accused is charged carries a serious sentence is however not necessarily a reason for denial of bail. That ground only becomes a factor if it may be an incentive to the accused to abscond appearing for trial. Therefore, the real question that the court must keep in mind is whether or not the accused will be able to attend the trial. The imposition of terms of the bail if necessary must similarly be for the purposes of ensuring the attendance of the accused at the trial and ought not to be based solely on the sentence that the accused stands to serve if convicted. It is therefore my view that the discretion to grant bail and set the conditions rests with the court. In exercising its discretion, the court must seek to strike a balance between protecting the liberty of the individual and safeguarding the proper administration of justice. As the fundamental consideration is the interests of justice, the court will lean in favour of liberty and grant bail where possible, provided the interests of justice will not be prejudiced by this. Put differently, bail should not be refused unless there are sufficient grounds for believing that the accused will fail to observe the conditions of her release. In ***S vs. Nyaruviro & Another (HB 262-17, HCB 122-17, XREF CRB 1454A-B-17) [2017] ZWBHC 262 (31 August 2017)***, the Court held that:

“The refusal to grant bail and the detention of an accused in custody shall be in the interests of justice where one or more of the following grounds are established where there is a likelihood that the accused, if he or she were released on bail, will (i) endanger the safety of the public or any particular person or will commit an offence referred to in the First Schedule; or (ii) not stand his or her trial or appear to receive sentence; or (iii) attempt to influence or intimidate witnesses or to conceal or destroy evidence; or (iv) undermine or jeopardise the objectives or proper functioning of the criminal justice system, including the bail system... the ties of the accused to the place of trial; the existence and location of assets held by the accused; the accused’s means of travel and his or her possession of or access to travel documents; the nature and gravity of the offence or the nature and gravity of the likely penalty therefore; the strength of the case for the prosecution and the corresponding incentive of the accused to flee; the efficacy of the amount or nature of the bail and enforceability of any bail conditions; any other factor which in the opinion of the court should be taken into account...In considering any question... the court shall decide the matter by weighing the interests of justice against the right of the accused to his or her personal freedom and in particular the prejudice he or she is likely to suffer if he or she were to be detained in custody, taking into account, where applicable, the following factors, namely (i) the period for which the accused has already been in custody since his or her arrest; (ii) the probable period of detention until the disposal or conclusion of the trial if the accused is not released on bail; (iii) the reason for any delay in the disposal or conclusion of the trial and any fault on the part of the accused with regard to such delay; (iv) any impediment in the preparation of the accused’s defence or any delay in obtaining legal representation which may be brought about by the detention of the accused; (v) the state of health of the accused; (vi) any other factor which in the opinion of the court should be taken into account... In assessing the risk of abscondment, the established approach is for the court to assess this risk by first assessing the likely degree of temptation to abscond which may face the accused. To do this, one must consider the gravity of the charge because quite clearly, the more serious the charge, the more severe the sentence is likely to be. In *S v Nichas* 1977 (1) SA 257 (C) it was observed that if there is a likelihood of heavy sentences being imposed the accused will be tempted to abscond. Similar sentiments were stated in *S v Hudson* 1980 (4) SA 145 (D) 146 in the following terms;

“The expectation of a substantial sentence of imprisonment would undoubtedly provide an incentive to the accused to abscond and leave the country.”

In other words, the possibility of a severe sentence enhances any possible inducement to the accused to flee. See also *Aitken v AG* 1992 (2) ZLR 249 and *Norman Mapfumo vs. The State* HH 63/2008... The other relevant factor to be considered is the relative strength of the state’s case against the accused on the merits of the charge and therefore the probability of a conviction. It stands to reason that the more likely a conviction, the greater will be the temptation not to stand trial. Despite being the fulcrum of the application, this factor must be considered together with other factors in the case.”

11. Gravity of the offence as a consideration was appreciated however by **Mboghli Msagha, J** in ***Criminal Application No. 319 of 2002 Priscilla Jemutai Kolonge vs. Republic*** (unreported) at page 3, wherein he held as follows:

“However, the nature of the charge or offence and the seriousness of the punishment if the applicant is found guilty must be considered in applications of this nature. I subscribe to the observation that where the charge against the accused is more serious and punishment heavy, there are more probabilities and incentive to abscond, whereas in case of minor offences, there may be no such incentive.”

12. The Nigerian Supreme Court (**Justice Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad J.S.C.**) set out some essential criteria on the issue of whether to grant bail in ***Alhaji Mujahid Dukubo – Asari vs. Federal Republic of Nigeria S.C. 20A/2006*** as follows:

“...When it comes to the issue of whether to grant or refuse bail pending trial of an accused by the trial court, the law has set out some criteria which the trial court shall consider in the exercise of its judicial discretion to arrive at a decision. These criteria have been well articulated in several decisions of this court. Such criteria include among others, the following:-

- (i) The nature of the charges;
- (ii) The strength of the evidence which supports the charge;
- (iii) The gravity of the punishment in the event of conviction;
- (iv) The previous criminal record of the accused if any;
- (v) The probability that the accused may not surrender himself for trial;
- (vi) The likelihood of the accused interfering with witnesses or may suppress any evidence that may incriminate him;
- (vii) The likelihood of further charges being brought against the accused;
- (viii) The probability of guilty;
- (ix) Detention for the protection of the accused;
- (x) The necessity to procure medical or social report pending final disposal of the case.

13. However, in **Republic vs. Danson Mgunya & Another [2010] eKLR**, the Court while appreciating the need in this Country to have a policy on bail/bond was of the view that the above criteria reflects the true legal position but opined that:

“...criteria (ii) above (the strength of the evidence which supports the charge) ought not apply in Kenya except where perhaps the application for bail is being made or renewed after the court has placed the accused on his defence. This is inconsistent with the principle that an accused is presumed innocent. Such criteria should be applied with great caution and only in exceptional circumstances like where there is a statement that show that the accused was caught-red handed or where there is a lawfully admitted confession. Criteria (viii) above (the probability of guilt) appears to be in reference to where an accused has been placed on his defence.”

14. That case was decided before the policy on bail-bond was formulated. It is now clear that in interpreting the right to bail, section 123A of the *Criminal Procedure Code* gives the parameters for the grant of the right to bail as follows:

(1) Subject to Article 49(1)(h) of the Constitution and notwithstanding section 123, in making a decision on bail and bond, the Court shall have regard to all the relevant circumstances and in particular—

- (a) the nature or seriousness of the offence;*
 - (b) the character, antecedents, associations and community ties of the accused person;*
 - (c) the defendant's record in respect of the fulfilment of obligations under previous grants of bail; and;*
 - (d) the strength of the evidence of his having committed the offence;*
- (2) A person who is arrested or charged with any offence shall be granted bail unless the court is satisfied that the person—*
- (a) has previously been granted bail and has failed to surrender to custody and that if released on bail (whether or not subject to conditions) it is likely that he would fail to surrender to custody;*
 - (b) should be kept in custody for his own protection.*

15. In **Kelly Kases Bunjika vs. Republic [2017] eKLR**, Muriithi, J was of the view that:

“The second limb of paragraph (b) of sub-section (1) of section 123A must be read separately and disjunctively from the first part so that the Court considers whether the accused ‘if released on bail (whether or not subject to conditions) it is likely that he would fail to surrender to custody’...Of course, the accused is standing trial for all the alleged offences of robbery with violence, escape from lawful custody and assault, and he is entitled to the presumption of innocence. It is no derogation of his right to that presumption of innocence that he is refused bail; it is merely the exercise of the Court’s mandate to grant bail as constitutionally empowered. It only means that the Court finds a compelling reason within the meaning of the Constitution to refuse bail in the particular case.”

16. The considerations in determining whether or not to grant bail are set out in Kenya Judiciary’s *Bail and Bond Policy Guidelines, March*

2015 at p. 25 which sets out judicial policy on bail as follows:

The following procedures should apply to the bail hearing:

(a) The Prosecution shall satisfy the Court, on a balance of probabilities, of the existence of compelling reasons that justify the denial of bail. The Prosecution must, therefore, state the reasons that in its view should persuade the court to deny the accused person bail, including the following:

a. That the accused person is likely to fail to attend court proceedings; or

b. That the accused person is likely to commit, or abet the commission of, a serious offence; or

c. That the exception to the right to bail stipulated under Section 123A of the Criminal Procedure Code is applicable in the circumstances; or

d. That the accused person is likely to endanger the safety of victims, individuals or the public; or

e. That the accused person is likely to interfere with witnesses or evidence; or

f. That the accused person is likely to endanger national security; or

g. That it is in the public interest to detain the accused person in custody.

17. I associate myself with the view expressed by Muriithi, J in Kelly Kases Bunjika vs. Republic (supra) that:

“It is clear that the primary consideration for bail is whether the accused will attend his trial for the charges facing him, and it must, therefore, be a compelling reason if it is demonstrated that *“the accused person is likely to fail to attend court proceedings”*. The question in this matter becomes whether there is, on a balance of probabilities evidence that the accused is likely to abscond. The accused claims to have a good defence to the charge of escape from custody. The nature of such defence and evidence is not disclosed. The accused merely asserts his “constitutional right to be granted Bond/Bail on reasonable and favourable terms.”

18. From the constitutional point of view, however, an accused person has the right to be released on bond or bail, on reasonable conditions pending a charge or trial. Therefore, the accused does not have to apply for release on bond since a person on whom rights have been bestowed under the Constitution is not obliged to ask for the same. This right can only be limited where it is shown that there exist compelling reasons not to be released. Those compelling reasons include the ones set out hereinabove. It is however my view that the burden to prove the existence of the said compelling reasons falls squarely on the prosecution. That was the position in Republic vs. William Mwangi Wa Mwangi [2014] eKLR where Muriithi, J held that:

“It is now settled that in the event that the state is opposed to the grant of bail to an accused person it has the onus of demonstrating that compelling reasons exist to justify denial of the Constitutional right to bail...It is trite that the cardinal principle which the court should consider in deciding whether to grant bail is whether the accused will turn up for his trial and whether there are substantial grounds to believe that he is likely to abscond if released on bail.”

19. In this case the opposition to the accused person’s release on bond is three-pronged. Firstly, it is contended that the offence with which the accused is charged is punishable by death hence the accused is likely to be a flight risk. In Foundation for Human Rights Initiatives vs. Attorney General [2008] 1 EA 120 it was held by the Constitutional Court of Uganda that:

“The context of article 23(6)(a) confers discretion upon the court whether to grant bail or not to grant bail. Bail is not automatic. Clearly the court has discretion to grant bail and impose reasonable conditions without contravening the Constitution. While the seriousness of the offence and the possible penalty which would be meted out are considerations to be taken into account in deciding whether or not to grant bail, applicants must be presumed innocent until proved guilty or until that person has pleaded guilty. The court has to be satisfied that the applicant should not be deprived of his/her freedom unreasonably and bail should not be refused merely as a punishment as this would conflict with the presumption of innocence. The court must consider and give the full benefit of his/her constitutional rights and freedoms by exercising its discretion judicially...]. It is not doubted or disputed that bail is an important judicial instrument to ensure individual liberty. However, the court has to address its mind to the objective of bail. However, the court has to address its mind to the objective of bail and it is equally an important judicial instrument to ensure the accused person’s appearance to answer the charge or charges against him or her. The objective and effect of bail are well settled and the main reason for granting bail to an accused person is to ensure that he appears to stand trial without the necessity of being detained in custody in the meantime. Under article 28(3) of the Constitution, an accused person charged with a criminal offence is presumed innocent until proved guilty or pleads guilty. If an accused person is remanded in custody but subsequently acquitted may have suffered gross injustice. Be that as it may, bail is not automatic and its effect is merely to release the accused from physical custody while he remains under the jurisdiction of the law and is bound to appear at the appointed place and time to answer the charge or charges against him.”

20. As regards the same issue, Ochieng, J in Republic vs. Ahmed Mohammed Omar & 6 Others [2010] eKLR expressed himself as

hereunder:

“Meanwhile, before the High Court of Kenya, at Nakuru, my Learned Brother Emukule J., has also had occasion to grapple with an application for bail pending trial. He did so in Republic vs Dorine Aoko Mbogo & Another, Criminal Case No. 36 of 2010; His Lordship expressed the view that;

‘Murder, (like) treason, robbery with violence or attempted robbery with violence are offences which are not only punishable by death, but are by reason of their gravity, (taking away another person’s life, disloyalty to the state of one’s nationality, or grievous assault or injury to another person or his property), are offences which are by their reprehensiveness, not condoned by society in general. It would thus hurt not merely society’s sense of fairness and justice, and more so, the kith and kin of the victim, to see a perpetrator of murder, treason or violent robbery (committed or attempted) walk the street on bond or bail pending his trial. A charge of murder, treason, robbery with violence (committed or attempted) would thus be a compelling reason for not granting an accused person bond or bail.’

Notwithstanding those remarks, the learned judge went ahead to grant bail in that case. I therefore believe that the judge did not, and could not have meant that once an accused person is charged with an offence punishable by death, that is reason enough to deny him bond or bail pending trial.”

21. According to the Supreme Court in Francis Karioko Muruatetu & Another vs. Republic [2017] eKLR, it is no longer mandatory that those found guilty of murder must be sentenced to death.

22. The second ground was based on the allegation that there is likelihood of the accused interfering with the witnesses. It was contended that the accused has been threatening the witnesses and this had been confirmed by the area assistant chief. One wonders how the accused has been sending threats to the witnesses while in custody. If he has been doing so through his family and or relatives, what has stopped action being taken against the said persons. In addition, the fact that an accused person is facing a charge of murder does not bar further charges being preferred against him his being in custody notwithstanding since obstructing a cause of justice itself is a criminal offence. It is the duty of the State to ensure that all persons enjoy their fundamental rights and this applies to both the victims and the accused persons. In this case it is contended that the area assistant chief is aware of the said threats yet there is no indication as what action, if any, has been taken along those lines. As for the accused himself, I associate myself with the opinion expressed in Rep vs. Dwight Sagaray & Others High Court Criminal Case No. 61 of 2012 that:

“For the prosecution to succeed in persuading the court on this criteria (of interference), it must place material before the court which demonstrate actual or perceived interference. It must also show the Court for example the existence of a threat or threats to witness; direct or indirect incriminating communication between the accused and witnesses; close familial relationship between the accused and the witnesses among others..., at least some facts must be placed before the court otherwise it is asking the court to speculate.”

23. In my view, there are in place constitutional and legislative mechanisms in place to protect witnesses who are shown to be under real threat if an accused person is released. Therefore, the Court in making a determination must consider whether such safeguards, if invoked, are unlikely to have any impact of the safety of the witnesses.

24. The third reason advanced is that the accused is a flight risk who was arrested while on the verge of crossing the border to a neighbouring country, Tanzania. Although in his submissions, the defence counsel **Mr Mwalimu** contended that the accused stated that he was working in Loitoktok where he was arrested, there is no such statement on the record of these proceedings. The only averment in the supporting affidavit is that the accused was not within the area at the time of the alleged offence. He has not explained where he was and what he was doing there. He did not file any further affidavit to deny the allegation by the prosecution that he was arrested near the border.

25. However, it is also my view that even in cases where limitations contemplated above exist, the Court must, as provided in Article 24(1) (e) of the Constitution, be satisfied that there are no less restrictive means to achieve the purpose other than the denial of bail. In other words, the Court is required to explore the possibility of achieving the primary objective of granting bail, which is the attendance of the accused at the trial, by imposing such conditions that would ameliorate the possibility of the exceptions being a hindrance to the fair trial. The ordinary meaning of the word “compelling” according to *Thesaurus English Dictionary* is forceful, convincing, persuasive, undeniable and gripping.

26. In Republic vs. Joktan Mayende & 4 Others Bungoma High Court Criminal Case No. 55 of 2009 court defined the term “compelling reasons” as follows:-

“The phrase compelling reasons would denote reasons that are forceful and convincing as to make the court feel very strongly that the accused should not be released on bond. Bail should not therefore be denied on flimsy grounds but on real and cogent grounds that meet the high standard set by the constitution.”

27. Citing the same case, the Court in Felity Sichangi Nyangesa vs. Republic (2014) eKLR held that:

“Where there is evidence that a person is accosted, physically or otherwise, by an accused person in the Case where a person is a witness, it suffices to prove that the accused did act(s) tending or intended to interfere with a witness. The Court is then entitled, if not bound to infer that the intention of the accused in accosting the witness had been to dissuasive the witness from giving evidence.”

28. As I have stated above it is upon the prosecution to prove that there exist compelling reasons to justify the court in limiting the applicant’s otherwise constitutionally guaranteed rights. Such compelling reasons cannot be said to have been satisfied based on bare

averments.

29. In this case, while I am not satisfied that the accused ought to be denied his constitutional right to bail, the terms imposed ought to be stringent. Without pre-empting the outcome of the case, I bear in mind the severity of the offence vis-à-vis the right of the accused to be admitted to bail and that there are mechanisms for protecting the witnesses in the case. I also consider that the court in admitting the accused to bail must do so conditions which are reasonable both to the accused and to the victims. I have also considered the nature of sentence available for the offence of murder in the event the accused is convicted. In the circumstances, I made the following orders:

(1) The accused persons may be released on bond of Kshs 800,000.00 with two sureties of similar amount to be approved by the Deputy Registrar, Kitui High Court.

(2) He shall report once a month before the said Deputy Registrar and shall attend court without fail whenever required to do so.

(3) He shall not contact or intimidate, whether directly or by proxy, any of the witnesses in this case as per the witness statements and other documents that have been supplied by the State to the defence.

(4) In the event that any of these conditions are violated, he is liable to have his bail cancelled and he shall proceed with the case while in custody

30. Orders accordingly.

Ruling read, signed and delivered in open court at Machakos 30th day of June, 2020.

G V ODUNGA

JUDGE

In the presence of:

Mr Langalanga for Mr Mwalimu for the accused

Mr Ngetich for Mr Mamba for the State

CA Geoffrey