

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

Sione K. Motuapuaka v. E. Sariano

Case No. 25-cv-07876-WHO (PR), Dkt. No. 3 · No. 25-cv-07876-WHO (PR) · Decided January 27, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of California issued an order to show cause in Sione K. Motuapuaka’s federal habeas petition under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. The court found cognizable due process and ineffective-assistance claims concerning the petitioner’s state-court resentencing and directed the respondent to file an answer or dispositive motion by June 1, 2026. The court also granted petitioner’s motion to proceed in forma pauperis and terminated pending motions.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	William H. Orrick
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
DECIDED	January 27, 2026
DOCKET	25-cv-07876-WHO (PR)
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Federal habeas corpus petition under 28 U.S.C. § 2254 reviewed under 28 U.S.C. § 2243 and Rule 4 of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases; the court issued an order to show cause and directed respondent to file an answer or dispositive motion.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under Rule 4 of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases and 28 U.S.C. § 2243, summary dismissal is appropriate only when the petition's allegations are vague or conclusory, palpably incredible, or patently frivolous or false.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district court order; generally nonprecedential.
PARTIES	Sione K. Motuapuaka v. E. Sariano

TOPICS

- federal habeas corpus
- post-conviction relief
- ineffective assistance
- due process
- motions to dismiss

PRACTICE AREAS

federal habeas corpus

post-conviction relief

criminal procedure

constitutional law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Motuapuaka's federal habeas petition stated cognizable claims under 28 U.S.C. § 2254.
2. Whether the petition should be summarily dismissed under Rule 4 of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases.

HOLDINGS

1. The petition stated cognizable claims for federal habeas relief based on alleged breach of the plea agreement in violation of due process and ineffective assistance of trial and appellate counsel.
2. Summary dismissal was not warranted because the petition's allegations, liberally construed, were cognizable and were not shown to be vague, conclusory, palpably incredible, or patently frivolous or false.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Summary dismissal is appropriate only where the allegations in the petition are vague or conclusory, palpably incredible, or patently frivolous or false.” (Discussion)

“The petition states cognizable due process and ineffective assistance of counsel claims.” (Introduction)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

In 2010, Sione K. Motuapuaka pleaded guilty to two counts of second degree burglary, four counts of second degree robbery, false imprisonment, kidnapping, and assault with a firearm. Although the plea form identified a maximum possible sentence of 66 years, the parties stipulated to a 60-year term. After the state corrections department identified a possible sentencing error, the state superior court resentenced Motuapuaka to 52 years; following reversal of the first resentencing because he was absent, the court again imposed a 52-year sentence, which the state appellate court affirmed.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Motuapuaka pleaded guilty in 2010 in the San Mateo County Superior Court to multiple felony offenses and received a stipulated 60-year sentence. After a resentencing petition, the superior court imposed a 52-year sentence; the California Court of Appeal reversed the first resentencing because Motuapuaka was absent from the hearing, and the superior court imposed the same 52-year term at a second hearing. The Court of Appeal affirmed the second resentencing, and the California Supreme Court denied review. Motuapuaka then filed this federal habeas petition alleging a due process violation based on breach of the plea agreement and ineffective assistance of trial and appellate counsel.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- People v. Motuapuaka, No. A161306, 2022 WL 897614, at *1 (Cal. Ct. App. Mar. 28, 2022)
- People v. Motuapuaka, No. A167340, 2024 WL 3157703, at *1 (Cal. Ct. App. June 25, 2024)
- Hendricks v. Vasquez, 908 F.2d 490, 491 (9th Cir. 1990)

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