

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Salas v. Pfeiffer

No. 1:21-cv-00669-KES-EPG (E.D. Cal. Sept. 1, 2025) · No. 1:21-cv-00669-KES-EPG (PC) · Decided
September 2, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California adopts the magistrate judge’s findings and recommendations in a prisoner civil-rights action. The court grants defendants’ motion for summary judgment in part as to injunctive relief, including the official-capacity RLUIPA claim, but denies it as to the plaintiff’s Fourteenth Amendment due process and First Amendment free-exercise claims. The court also concludes that defendants are not entitled to qualified immunity on the claims at issue.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	September 2, 2025
DOCKET	1:21-cv-00669-KES-EPG (PC)
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff, a state prisoner proceeding pro se under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, opposed defendants' motion for summary judgment. A magistrate judge recommended granting the motion in part and denying it in part. After de novo review of defendants' objections, the district court adopted the findings and recommendations.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); summary judgment must be evaluated in the light most favorable to the nonmoving party, and is proper only when there is no genuine dispute of material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Rafael Salas v. C. Pfeiffer, Thomas, Cortez

TOPICS

- section 1983
- prisoners rights
- qualified immunity
- summary judgment
- due process

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

constitutional law

prisoner rights

civil procedure

remedies

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether defendants' objections established that Salas could have obtained declaratory relief under California Code of Civil Procedure § 1060 or pursued annulment proceedings to establish that he had never been married.
2. Whether defendants established a legitimate basis for considering the hypothetical effect of Salas's marriage on Flores in evaluating the burden on Salas's constitutional rights.
3. Whether defendants were entitled to qualified immunity on claims that they required Salas to complete an impossible task and that Cortez selectively denied assistance because of his fiancée's race.
4. Whether summary judgment should be granted on Salas's Fourteenth Amendment due process and First Amendment free exercise claims and on his request for injunctive relief, including his official-capacity RLUIPA claim.

HOLDINGS

1. The court was not required to consider defendants' argument that Salas could have obtained declaratory relief because defendants raised it for the first time in their reply brief and more fully in their objections.
2. Defendants failed to establish that Salas could have obtained a declaratory judgment concerning a purported marriage when Salas maintained that no marriage or marriage contract ever existed and there was no identified actual controversy between Salas and Flores.
3. Defendants did not establish that an annulment action was appropriate where Salas's position was that no purported marriage ever occurred.
4. The hypothetical impact on Flores did not undermine the magistrate judge's analysis because the relevant Turner factor concerns the impact on guards, inmates, and prison resources, not a speculative impact on a third party who asserted no prejudice. Although preventing bigamy is a valid state interest generally, Salas brought an as-applied challenge.
5. Defendants were not entitled to qualified immunity because, viewing the facts in Salas's favor, requiring him to complete an impossible task was arbitrary and unconstitutional, and preexisting law clearly established that such a requirement was not a legitimate reason to burden a prisoner's right to marry.
6. Cortez was not entitled to qualified immunity because a government employee empowered to assist prisoners may not selectively deny that assistance solely because of a constitutionally protected interest such as a fiancée's race.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The qualified immunity inquiry involves two questions: “(1) whether the facts, taken in the light most favorable to the non-moving party, show that the officials’ conduct violated a constitutional right, and (2) whether the law at the time of the challenged conduct clearly established that the conduct was unlawful.”” (at 4)

“It need not be shown “that the very action at issue [has] been held unlawful before qualified immunity is shed. On the contrary, [officials] can still be on notice that their conduct violates established law even in novel factual circumstances.”” (at 5)

“It is clearly established that “even though a person has no ‘right’ to a valuable governmental benefit and even though the government may deny him the benefit for any number of reasons, there are some reasons upon which the government may not rely.”” (at 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Salas, a state prisoner, alleged that prison officials required him to provide a document proving that he had never been married before they would allow him to marry his fiancée, Tower, even though defendants allegedly knew that such a document did not exist. He also alleged that defendant Cortez refused to assist him because of his fiancée's race. The action concerns alleged burdens on Salas's right to marry and related Fourteenth Amendment due process and First Amendment free exercise claims.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Defendants moved for summary judgment on all claims. The magistrate judge recommended granting summary judgment on plaintiff's request for injunctive relief, including his RLUIPA claim against defendants in their official capacities, while denying summary judgment on plaintiff's Fourteenth Amendment due process and First Amendment free exercise claims. Defendants objected, challenging the availability of declaratory or annulment relief, the treatment of alleged governmental interests, and the denial of qualified immunity. The district court overruled the objections, adopted the findings and recommendations in full, granted the motion in part, denied it in part, and referred the matter back to the magistrate judge.

DISPOSITION

other

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The matter was referred back to the assigned magistrate judge for further proceedings. The case proceeds on Salas's Fourteenth Amendment due process and First Amendment free exercise claims against Thomas, Cortez, and Pfeiffer; the request for injunctive relief, including the official-capacity RLUIPA claim, remains resolved in defendants' favor.

CASES CITED

- *Zamani v. Carnes*, 491 F.3d 990, 997 (9th Cir. 2007)
- *Brown v. Roe*, 279 F.3d 742, 745–46 (9th Cir. 2002)
- *Lakatos v. RLI Corp.*, 736 F. Supp. 3d 796 (C.D. Cal. 2024)
- *Connerly v. Schwarzenegger*, 146 Cal. App. 4th 739, 752, 53 Cal. Rptr. 3d 203 (2007)
- *Pearson v. Callahan*, 555 U.S. 223, 231 (2009)
- *Felarca v. Birgeneau*, 891 F.3d 809, 815 (9th Cir. 2018)

- *City of Escondido v. Emmons*, 586 U.S. 38, 42–43 (2019)
- *Blankenhorn v. City of Orange*, 485 F.3d 463, 481 (9th Cir. 2007)
- *Inouye v. Kemna*, 504 F.3d 705, 715 (9th Cir. 2007)
- *Wilson v. Layne*, 526 U.S. 603, 615 (1999)
- *Rodriguez v. County of Los Angeles*, 891 F.3d 776, 796 (9th Cir. 2018)
- *Messina v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. CIV.A. 05CV73409DT, 2006 WL 374564, at *6 (E.D. Mich. Feb. 16, 2006)
- *In re Two Appeals Arising Out of San Juan Dupont Plaza Hotel Fire Litig.*, 994 F.2d 956, 961 (1st Cir. 1993)
- *Franki Found. Co. v. Alger–Rau & Assocs. Inc.*, 513 F.2d 581, 587 (3d Cir. 1975)
- *Northern Heel Corp. v. Compo Indus., Inc.*, 851 F.2d 456, 461 (1st Cir. 1988)
- *United States v. Smith*, 50 F.3d 18 (9th Cir. 1995)
- *Rizzo v. Dawson*, 778 F.2d 527, 532 (9th Cir. 1985)
- *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78, 95 (1987)
- *Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U.S. 539, 558 (1974)
- *Perry v. Sindermann*, 408 U.S. 593, 597 (1972)
- *Arizona Students’ Ass’n v. Arizona Bd. of Regents*, 824 F.3d 858, 869 (9th Cir. 2016)
- *Harris v. McRae*, 448 U.S. 297, 317–18 (1980)
- *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1, 11 (1967)
- *Palmore v. Sidoti*, 466 U.S. 429, 432 (1984)
- *Johnson v. California*, 543 U.S. 499, 507 (2005)
- *DeShaney v. Winnebago Cnty. Dep’t of Soc. Servs.*, 489 U.S. 189, 197 n.3 (1989)

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