

NEW YORK COURT OF APPEALS

The People v. Dakota W. Baldwin

No. 14 · No. No. 14 · Decided March 21, 2023

SUMMARY

The New York Court of Appeals dismissed the appeal as moot because the maximum term of the defendant's sentence had expired. A concurrence explained that the mootness exception did not apply because the Third Department had corrected its prior use of an allegedly erroneous standard for sentence reductions in the interest of justice.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	New York Court of Appeals
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Acting Chief Judge Cannataro; Judge Rivera; Judge Garcia; Judge Wilson; Judge Singas; Judge Troutman
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	March 21, 2023
DOCKET	No. 14
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from a criminal sentencing decision in which the appellant challenged the Third Department's standard for reducing a sentence in the interest of justice. The Court of Appeals dismissed the appeal as moot because the maximum term of the sentence had expired.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Court of Appeals may review whether an appellate court applied an incorrect legal standard, even when the appellate court characterizes its decision as an exercise of interest-of-justice discretion. The appeal was nevertheless dismissed because the sentencing issue was moot and did not qualify for the exception for important and recurring issues unlikely to be otherwise reviewable.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Court of Appeals memorandum; the mootness disposition is precedential, but the concurrence's discussion of the merits is nonbinding.
PARTIES	Dakota W. Baldwin v. The People

TOPICS

mootness

appellate procedure

appellate jurisdiction

sentencing

criminal procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Criminal procedure

Appellate procedure

Sentencing

Mootness

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the expiration of Baldwin's maximum sentence rendered his challenge to the sentence-reduction standard moot.
2. Whether the mootness exception for important and recurring issues applied.

HOLDINGS

1. The appeal must be dismissed because the issues presented became moot after the maximum term of Baldwin's sentence expired.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The appeal should be dismissed upon the ground that the issues presented have become moot" (-1-)

"broad, plenary power to modify a sentence ... may be exercised, if the interest of justice warrants, without deference to the sentencing court" (-2-)

"The maximum term of Mr. Baldwin's sentence has expired." (-3-)

"In a way, then, Mr. Baldwin has prevailed on the merits of his argument even though his appeal is moot."
(-4-)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Baldwin challenged the Third Department's longstanding use of an 'extraordinary circumstances or abuse of discretion' requirement when defendants sought sentence reductions under CPL 470.15 (6) (b). His maximum sentence expired while the appeal was pending, and subsequent Third Department decisions adopted the statutory 'unduly harsh or severe' standard.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Baldwin appealed after the Third Department applied a standard requiring extraordinary circumstances or an abuse of discretion to obtain an interest-of-justice sentence reduction. While the appeal was pending in the Court of Appeals, Baldwin's maximum sentence expired, and the Third Department apparently adopted the statutory 'unduly harsh or severe' standard in later cases.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- People v McLaine, 64 NY2d 934, 934 [1985]
- People v Chi Fong Chen, 100 NY2d 527, 528 [2003]
- People v Delgado, 80 NY2d 780, 780 [1992]
- People v Thomas, 194 AD3d 1405, 1406 [4th Dept 2021]
- People v Epackchi, 37 NY3d 39, 43-45 [2021]
- Hearst Corp. v Clyne, 50 NY2d 707, 714 [1980]
- People v Sanders, 206 AD3d 1164, 1165 [3d Dept 2022]
- People v Harris, 206 AD3d 1454, 1461 [3d Dept 2022]
- People v Machia, 206 AD3d 1272, 1278 [3d Dept 2022]
- People v Streater, 207 AD3d 952, 954 [3d Dept 2022]
- People v Kimball, 2023 WL 1824967 [3d Dept 2023]
- People v Garrick, 181 NYS3d 471 [3d Dept 2023]

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

State of New York MEMORANDUM Court of Appeals This memorandum is uncorrected and subject to revision before publication in the New York Reports. No. 14 The People &c., Respondent, v. Dakota W. Baldwin, Appellant. Clea Weiss, for appellant. Zachary Persichini, for respondent. MEMORANDUM: The appeal should be dismissed upon the ground that the issues presented have become moot (see People v McLaine, 64 NY2d 934, 934 [1985]; see also People v Chi Fong Chen, 100 NY2d 527, 528 [2003]). -1- WILSON, J. (concurring): The question presented on this appeal is whether, for the past several decades, the Third Department has imposed an erroneous legal standard on criminal defendants seeking a reduction of their sentences in the interest of justice.

Mr. Baldwin points to countless -1- -2- No. 14 Third Department cases, including his own, in which the Third Department employed a test requiring a showing of extraordinary circumstances or abuse of discretion for it to exercise its interest of justice jurisdiction to modify a sentence. Relying on the statutory language empowering the Appellate Division to reduce “unduly harsh or severe” sentences in the interest of justice (CPL 470.15 [6] [b]), Mr. Baldwin contends that the Third Department’s test constitutes an incorrect legal standard.

Mr. Baldwin argues that the Third Department’s requirement that a defendant show a clear abuse of discretion or extraordinary circumstances is contrary to both our case law and the practices of the other Appellate Division departments.

In People v Delgado, we emphasized that the Appellate Division’s “broad, plenary power to modify a sentence ... may be exercised, if the interest of justice warrants, without deference to the sentencing court” (80 NY2d 780, 780 [1992]). Mr. Baldwin contends that the Third Department’s

standard is an outlier: it is used by no other department, and has been expressly rejected by the Fourth Department (see eg *People v Thomas*, 194 AD3d 1405, 1406 [4th Dept 2021] [“We are compelled to emphasize once again that, contrary to the People’s assertion, a criminal defendant need not show extraordinary circumstances or an abuse of discretion by the sentencing court in order to obtain a sentence reduction under CPL 470.15 (6) (b)”] [internal quotations omitted]).

In *People v Epackchi* (37 NY3d 39, 43-45 [2021]), we held that even if an appellate court has couched its decision as one made in the interest of justice, if the court’s practical exercise of its discretion evidences the existence of a standard, and even if that standard allows for deviation in “exceptional circumstances,” we are empowered to review the -2- -3- No. 14 propriety of the standard.

Mr. Baldwin relies on *Epackchi* for the proposition that, although our court lacks the power to modify sentences in the interest of justice, we do have the power (and obligation) to correct appellate courts that have applied an incorrect legal standard when exercising their interest of justice power, to ensure compliance with governing law and uniformity across the state.

I agree with the majority that Mr. Baldwin’s appeal is moot, but believe further explanation is required to address why his appeal does not meet the mootness exception. The maximum term of Mr. Baldwin’s sentence has expired.

Thus, the issue of whether his sentence is excessive “may not properly be decided by this court unless it is found to be within the exception to the doctrine which permits the courts to preserve for review important and recurring issues which, by virtue of their relatively brief existence, would be rendered otherwise nonreviewable” (*Hearst Corp. v Clyne*, 50 NY2d 707, 714 [1980]).

Here, however, as Mr. Baldwin himself points out, the issue is not likely to recur. The Third Department, to its great credit, apparently noticed the pendency of this appeal and the issue it raised, after which it corrected its longstanding use of the wrong standard, making repetition of the error unlikely (see e.g. *People v Sanders*, 206 AD3d 1164, 1165 [3d Dept 2022]; *People v Harris*, 206 AD3d 1454, 1461 [3d Dept 2022]; *People v Machia*, 206 AD3d 1272, 1278 [3d Dept 2022]; *People v Streater*, 207 AD3d 952, 954 [3d Dept 2022]; *People v Kimball*, 2023 WL 1824967 [3d Dept 2023]; *People v Garrick*, 181 NYS3d 471 [3d Dept 2023]).

Mr. Baldwin’s opening brief in our court was filed in May 2022. No Third Department case since May 2022 has used the “abuse of discretion or extraordinary circumstances” standard; each has used the “unduly harsh or severe” -3- -4- No. 14 standard set forth in CPL 470.15 (6) (b).

Thus, the exception to the mootness doctrine does not apply. In a way, then, Mr. Baldwin has prevailed on the merits of his argument even though his appeal is moot. Appeal dismissed upon the ground that the issues presented have become moot, in a memorandum. Acting Chief Judge

Cannataro and Judges Rivera, Garcia, Wilson, Singas and Troutman concur, Judge Wilson in a concurring opinion.

Decided March 21, 2023 -4-

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