

**IN THE  
SUPREME COURT OF THE REPUBLIC OF PALAU  
APPELLATE DIVISION**

RICHARD SILMAI, JOEL TORIBIONG,  
EPHRAIM NGIRACHITEI,  
MOSES YOBECH, ISRAEL DEMEI,  
and RICHARD SANDEI,

Appellants,

v.

PALAU ELECTION COMMISSION,

Appellee.

CIVIL APPEAL NO. 16-020  
(Civil Action No. 16-085)

**ORDER GRANTING  
MOTION TO DISMISS AND  
DISMISSING APPEAL**

Decided: January 10, 2017

Counsel for Appellants: J. Toribiong  
Counsel for Appellee: A. Trout

BEFORE: ARTHUR NGIRAKLSONG, Chief Justice  
JOHN K. RECHUCHER, Associate Justice  
R. BARRIE MICHELSEN, Associate Justice

Appeal from the Trial Division, the Honorable Kathleen M. Salii, Associate Justice, presiding.

PER CURIAM:

On November 8, 2016, counsel for Appellants filed a notice of appeal in this matter. Forty-five days later, on December 23, 2016, Appellants' counsel filed their opening brief. Appellee Palau Election Commission ("PEC") moved to dismiss the appeal. The PEC contends that this is an election-related appeal that falls under the expedited briefing deadlines provided in ROP R. App. P. 31(d). Under Rule 31(d), opening briefs are due within fifteen days of the filing of the notice of appeal. Because Appellants' opening brief was not filed within the fifteen-day limit, the PEC argues that the appeal should be dismissed. We agree.

Rule 31(c) provides that “[i]f an appellant fails to file a brief within the time provided by this rule, or within an extended time, an appellee may move to dismiss the appeal.” The rules provide two different time limits depending on the subject matter of the appeal. Rule 31(b) provides a standard time limit of forty-five days to file an opening brief. Rule 31(d) provides a shortened time limit of fifteen days for “[a]ny appeal in which the election of a public official or the qualifications or office of a elected official is disputed.” We conclude that Rule 31(d) applies to this appeal and that the opening brief is a month late.

Appellants do not contest that their suit proceeded on an expedited basis in the Trial Division. The first sentence of their complaint sought an expedited disposition under ROP R. Civ. P. 9(i)<sup>1</sup> because “the relief sought will affect the election of public officials in the upcoming primary and national elections.” Both the parties, and the trial court, proceeded below as if the expedited deadlines applied. We see no reason to proceed differently on appeal.

Appellants’ arguments that the expedited deadlines do not apply are unpersuasive. Appellants suggest that whether an appeal is to be expedited depends on whether an appellant requests expedited treatment in the notice of appeal. They further assert that if the PEC “had wished for a fast tracked appeal it should have moved this Court to expedite it” upon service of the notice of appeal. Neither contention is correct. A party cannot toggle on or off the rules as they desire. The subject matter of the appeal determines which rule—and in turn which time limit—applies.

Appellants also contend that this appeal no longer involves an election dispute. They argue that despite the expedited treatment and injunctive relief sought at trial, “the spirit and

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<sup>1</sup> Civil Rule 9(i) is the trial-level analogue of Appellate Rule 31(d). The relevant language of the two rules is functionally identical, providing expedited deadlines for certain election-related cases.

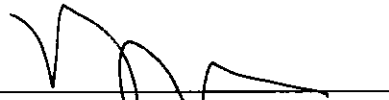
purpose of the case” was a declaratory judgment action about the interpretation of election statutes “in order to preserve the integrity of all elections.” Appellants’ suggestion that they only seek straightforward review of the interpretation of a statute is not consistent with their appellate brief, which seeks an “order” enjoining the PEC from alleged “unlawful practice[s].” Regardless, appellate briefing is too late to alter the nature of a lawsuit or add or modify claims.

Finally, Appellants’ generalized invocation of democratic principles as a reason not to dismiss their appeal misapprehends the role of the Judiciary in our democracy. Courts are not general forums for airing grievances and judges are not appointed to referee every dispute that arises in society. Courts hear only certain disputes in law and equity, and judges decide those disputes by applying identifiable legal and equitable standards. If Appellants believe the election statutes at issue here need revising, the elected branches of government are the proper venues in which to initiate that debate.

Rule 31(d) was added to the Appellate Rules in 2007 to expedite cases involving an election of a public official. This matter qualifies as such a case. The comments to the rule explain that “[i]t is in the interests of justice to expeditiously resolve election and qualification disputes.” See Rule 31(d), cmt. Had Appellants initially sought additional time to file their brief, they would have been required to show “extraordinary circumstances” for the extension. See Rule 31(d) (“No enlargement of time will be granted absent a showing of extraordinary circumstances.”). They have not shown any such circumstances here. “Appellant’s counsel simply pleads for another chance for the case to be decided on its merits. This is sorely insufficient to satisfy the extraordinary circumstances standard.” *Fritz v. KSPLA*, 17 ROP 294, 297 (2010).


For the foregoing reasons, the PEC's motion to dismiss is granted and this appeal is dismissed for Appellants' failure to comply with Rule 31.

**SO ORDERED**, this <sup>P</sup>10 day of January, 2017.



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ARTHUR NGRAKLSONG  
Chief Justice



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JOHN K. REUCHER  
Associate Justice



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R. BARRIE MICHELSEN  
Associate Justice