Circuit Court for Prince George's County
Case No. CAD19-04177

UNREPORTED*

IN THE APPELLATE COURT

OF MARYLAND

No. 324

September Term, 2025

SEAN W. LEDBETTER

v.

TIFFANY S. LEDBETTER

Nazarian,
Arthur,
Zic,

JJ.

Opinion by Arthur, J.

Filed: June 12, 2026

*This is an unreported opinion. This opinion may not be cited as precedent within the rule of stare decisis. It may be cited for persuasive value only if the citation conforms to Rule 1-104(a)(2)(B).

The Circuit Court for Prince George's County entered an oral order purporting to hold appellant Sean W. Ledbetter in civil contempt because of his failure to comply with an order compelling him to respond to post-judgment discovery. Before the court signed a written order embodying its oral ruling, Mr. Ledbetter purged his contempt by responding to the discovery requests. He also appealed, challenging the contempt order and the circuit court judge's decision not to recuse herself.

For the reasons stated herein, we shall vacate the portion of the written order holding Mr. Ledbetter in contempt. We decline to consider any other issues, because they are moot.

FACTUAL AND PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND

Mr. Ledbetter and appellee Tiffany S. Ledbetter were divorced in the Circuit Court for Prince George's County in 2020. Since the divorce, the parties have engaged in an extensive amount of post-judgment litigation concerning matters such as their child's private school tuition, qualified domestic relations orders and a retirement benefits order, their respective obligations on a joint line of credit, and a monetary award that was entered as a judgment against Mr. Ledbetter.

In an order docketed on October 1, 2024, the circuit court compelled Mr. Ledbetter to respond to discovery in aid of execution on a judgment against him. On October 28, 2024, after Mr. Ledbetter failed to comply with that order, Ms. Ledbetter moved that he be held in contempt.

On November 27, 2024, while the contempt motion was pending, Mr. Ledbetter moved to recuse Judge ShaRon Kelsey, the circuit court judge who had presided over the

case. In that motion, Mr. Ledbetter argued, among other things, that Ms. Ledbetter and her parents were friends with Judge Sheila Tillerson Adams, the former administrative judge of the circuit court, and with Judge Adams's husband; that Ms. Ledbetter was employed by Judge Adams's husband; and that Judge Kelsey was "expected to know" Judge Adams "by virtue of their service" on the circuit court. In addition, Mr. Ledbetter asserted that in earlier proceedings Judge Kelsey had "admonished and chastized" [sic] him; that she had been "hostile" and "rude"; that she had accused him of being "dishonest" but had taken "no punitive action" against Ms. Ledbetter when, he said, Ms. Ledbetter also "had been dishonest"; and that Judge Kelsey had made other rulings with which he disagreed.

On December 17, 2024, Judge Kelsey denied the motion to recuse.

The court conducted a hearing on pending motions, including the contempt motion, on January 9, 2025. The court orally pronounced its rulings in open court on March 14, 2025.

In its oral ruling, the court found Mr. Ledbetter in contempt. As an apparent sanction, the court purported to sentence him to jail from 6:00 p.m. on Friday, March 28, 2025, until 6:00 p.m. on Sunday, March 30, 2025. The court ordered that he could purge his contempt by responding to the outstanding discovery by March 27, 2025. The court did not embody its decision in a written order at that time.[1]

[1] The oral ruling is not a proper order of civil contempt. In an order of civil contempt, a court does not "sentence" a party to a term in jail. Instead, a court may order that a party be jailed until the party purges the contempt by coming into compliance with (continued)

Mr. Ledbetter purged his contempt on March 26, 2025, by responding to the outstanding discovery. On that date, he filed what he called a "notice of compliance" to inform the court that he had complied with the order compelling discovery.

Although he had purged his contempt by complying with the order compelling discovery, Mr. Ledbetter noted an appeal on April 14, 2025. When he noted his appeal, the court had not yet embodied its contempt ruling in a written order.[2]

On June 6, 2025, the court entered a lengthy written order that reflected its earlier rulings, including the ruling by which it held Mr. Ledbetter in contempt. The order purported to "reserve[]" the imposition of sanctions and to permit Mr. Ledbetter to purge his contempt by "answering all discovery requests" within 10 business days. The order

the court's orders. *See generally Breona C. v. Rodney D.*, 253 Md. App. 67, 73-75 (2021). In those circumstances, the party is said to hold the keys to the prison because the party must be released upon compliance with the court's orders. *See, e.g., State v. Roll*, 267 Md. 714, 729 (1973). A fixed sentence is associated with a finding of criminal contempt, which must be accompanied by the procedural safeguards in Maryland Rules 15-203, 15-204, and 15-205.

[2] Under section 12-304 of the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article of the Maryland Code (1974, 2020 Repl. Vol.), Mr. Ledbetter had the right to take an interlocutory appeal of the order adjudging him in contempt. His appeal was, however, premature, because it had not yet been "set forth" in a separate written document "and recorded in accordance with Rule 2-601." *Metro Maint. Sys. South, Inc. v. Milburn*, 442 Md. 289, 298 (2015). Despite its premature nature, the appeal is properly before us because the court eventually entered a written order (more or less) embodying the contempt ruling. *See* Md. Rule 8-602(f) ("[a] notice of appeal filed after the announcement or signing by the trial court of a ruling, decision, order, or judgment but before entry of the ruling, decision, order, or judgment on the docket shall be treated as filed on the same day as, but after, the entry on the docket[]").

did not note that Mr. Ledbetter had answered the discovery requests more than two months earlier.[3]

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

Mr. Ledbetter raises three questions, which we quote:

1. Whether the Circuit Court erred in holding Ledbetter in contempt.

2. Whether Judge Kelsey should have granted Ledbetter's motion for recusal because her impartiality could fairly be questioned.

3. Whether Judge Kelsey's decisions in the proceedings are tainted with bias.

We decline to reach these issues, because the only appealable order in this case—the order holding Mr. Ledbetter in contempt—is largely moot.

DISCUSSION

In general, a party can appeal only from a final judgment. Maryland Code (1974, 2020 Repl. Vol.), § 12-301 of the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article. "[A] ruling must ordinarily have the following three attributes to be a final judgment: (1) it must be intended by the court as an unqualified, final disposition of the matter in controversy, (2) unless the court acts pursuant to Maryland Rule 2-602(b) to direct the entry of a final judgment as to less than all of the claims or all of the parties, it must adjudicate or complete the adjudication of all claims against all parties; [and] (3) it must be set forth and recorded in accordance with Rule 2-601." *Metro Maint. Sys. South, Inc. v. Milburn*,

[3] Because the order did not impose an immediate sanction, it appears, on its face, not to have been a proper order of civil contempt. *See generally Breona C. v. Rodney D.*, 253 Md. App. at 73-75. Arguably, however, the court simply intended to stay its order for 10 days.

442 Md. at 298 (further citations omitted). No one contends that the order from which Mr. Ledbetter appealed is a final judgment.

One statutory exception to this so-called final judgment rule is contained in section 12-304(a) of the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article. Section 12-304(a) permits a person to appeal from an interlocutory, or non-final, order that adjudges the person in contempt. Section 12-304 authorizes the appeal in this case. *See supra* n.2.

"On an appeal from a final judgment, an interlocutory order previously entered in the action is open to review by the Court unless an appeal has previously been taken from that order and decided on the merits by the Court." Md. Rule 8-131(d). That rule, however, "ordinarily does *not* apply when a party exercises the right to an immediate appeal of an interlocutory order under a statute, a rule, or the collateral order doctrine." *Maryland Bd. of Physicians v. Geier*, 225 Md. App. 114, 140 (2015) (emphasis in original). Thus, a permissible interlocutory appeal, such as an appeal from an order adjudging a person in contempt, ordinarily is not "'a final decision to which may be added other matters for appeal[.]'" *See Snowden v. Baltimore Gas & Elec. Co.*, 300 Md. 555, 560 n.2 (1984) (quoting *United States v. Fort Sill Apache Tribe of State of Okl.*, 507 F.2d 861, 863 (Ct. Cl. 1974)); *Maryland Bd. of Physicians v. Geier*, 225 Md. App. at 140. Thus, the only issue before us is the ruling by which the court held Mr. Ledbetter in contempt.

That order is largely moot. In fact, the order was moot before the written order was entered and before Mr. Ledbetter noted his (premature) appeal. *See supra* n.2.

"Generally, a case is moot . . . 'when the court can no longer fashion an effective remedy.'" *D.L. v. Sheppard Pratt Health Sys., Inc.*, 465 Md. 339, 351-52 (2019) (quoting *In re Kaela C.*, 394 Md. 432, 452 (2006)). Even if the court erred in holding Mr. Ledbetter in contempt, we can do nothing to relieve him of the principal consequences of that decision: he had already relieved himself of those consequences by purging his contempt and thereby avoiding the sanctions that the court had threatened to impose. To that extent, the propriety of the contempt is moot.

To the extent that the recusal issue is subsumed in the contempt order, it is arguably before us. *See Snowden v. Baltimore Gas & Elec. Co.*, 300 Md. at 560 n.2. For purposes of the present case, however, that issue is moot as well. Again, even if Judge Kelsey should have recused herself from the decision about whether to hold Mr. Ledbetter in contempt, we can do nothing to relieve him of the principal consequences of that decision: he had already relieved himself of those consequences by purging his contempt and thereby avoiding the sanctions that the court had threatened to impose.[4]

[4] Our opinion should not be read to imply or suggest that Judge Kelsey had an obligation to recuse herself. Generally, judges must recuse themselves when a reasonable person with knowledge and understanding of all the relevant facts would question their impartiality. *Matter of Russell*, 464 Md. 390, 402 (2019). "[T]here is[,]" however, "a strong presumption in Maryland . . . that judges are impartial participants in the legal process[.]'" *Id.* at 403 (quoting *Jefferson-El v. State*, 330 Md. 99, 107 (1993)). To overcome this presumption, the party requesting recusal "'bears the 'heavy burden'" of proving that the trial judge has a personal bias or prejudice against the movant, or personal knowledge of disputed evidentiary facts[.]'" *Attorney Grievance Comm'n v. Blum*, 373 Md. 275, 297 (2003) (quoting *Attorney Grievance Comm'n v. Shaw*, 363 Md. 1, 11 (2001)); *see Jefferson-El v. State*, 330 Md. at 107. The bias, prejudice, or knowledge must come from an extrajudicial source; information gathered from filings, and opinions formed during trial, do not give rise to "'personal bias[.]'" *See, e.g.*,

(continued)

At oral argument, Mr. Ledbetter argued that an appellate court has the discretion to consider moot issues in certain limited circumstances. For example, a court may decide a moot issue if it is capable of repetition but will evade review or if it involves a question of public concern. *D.L. v. Sheppard Pratt Health Sys., Inc.*, 465 Md. at 352. We decline to exercise our discretion to review the moot issues in the circumstances of this case.

An issue, however, is not moot if it has collateral consequences. *Id.* Mr. Ledbetter arguably faces some collateral consequences insofar as the written order of June 6, 2025, purports to hold him in contempt, to reserve the imposition of sanctions against him, and to give him 10 days to purge his putative contempt even though he had purged his contempt more than two months earlier. We vacate that portion of the order, which the court should never have entered. The rest of the order remains intact.

ORDER OF THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY DATED JUNE 6, 2025, VACATED INSOFAR AS IT PURPORTS TO HOLD APPELLANT IN CONTEMPT, TO RESERVE THE IMPOSITION OF SANCTIONS, AND TO GIVE HIM 10 DAYS TO PURGE HIS

Jefferson-El v. State, 330 Md. at 107. A judge's "'duty to preside when qualified is as strong as [the] duty to refrain from presiding when not qualified.'" *Matter of Russell*, 464 Md. at 403 (quoting *Jefferson-El v. State*, 330 Md. at 107). The recusal decision "is discretionary," "and the exercise of that discretion will not be overturned except for abuse." *Jefferson-El v. State*, 330 Md. at 107 (citations omitted). "'Like all legal issues, judges determine appearance of impropriety—not by considering what a straw poll of the only partly informed man-in-the-street would show—but by examining the record facts and the law, and then deciding whether a reasonable person knowing and understanding all the relevant facts would recuse the judge.'" *Boyd v. State*, 321 Md. 69, 86 (1990) (quoting *In re Drexel Burnham Lambert Inc.*, 861 F.2d 1307, 1313 (2d Cir. 1988)) (emphasis in original).

CONTEMPT. CASE REMANDED TO THAT COURT FOR FURTHER PROCEEDINGS CONSISTENT WITH THIS OPINION. COSTS TO BE EVENLY DIVIDED BETWEEN THE PARTIES.