

Gonzalo González Mejía and his family are all too familiar with the recent exploitation of rural farmers by well-connected real estate developers in Spain. Few Spanish provinces have avoided the rampant real estate speculation scandals, born from a loosely interpreted and over-permissive property law. Although some of the politicians involved have been accused publicly and even imprisoned, many still walk free, with the only sign of the scandals being a few extra zeros in their bank accounts.

The González Mejías family began working their land, known as El Quiñón, located in the city of Seseña in 1945, before Spain had any property registers. Following the establishment of such records in 1991, Gonzalo González Mejía decided to purchase the land that he and his family had farmed for decades. He still had his land lease receipts and was entitled to buy, according to a ruling by the District Court of Illescas. The owner of the land appealed the decision, however, beginning a long series of court battles.

In 1994, months after the Provincial Court of Toledo had ruled for the second time in González Mejía's favor, the property's owner sold it to Promoción Comunidad Pantoja S.A., a dormant company set up in 1983, whose only asset was El Quiñón. Soon after the purchase, the company changed its name to Parque Tecnológico Toledo Norte S.A. Strangely enough, Parque Tecnológico Toledo Norte's three shareholders were all connected to Francisco Hernando, a powerful former well-digger turned real-estate developer.

Hernando, with the alleged help of the local mayor at that time, ensured that the building contract for construction on El Quiñón was awarded to him. Meanwhile, the court battle between González Mejía and El Quiñón's owner continued. In 1997, the family again won their case before the Spanish Supreme Court. A court-appointed surveyor was ordered to determine the price of the land before sale to González Mejía — however it was six years before the surveyor arrived to fix the price.

As González Mejía waited for the surveyor, Hernando, again with the alleged help of the mayor at that time, had the land rezoned from rural to urban use. Once Hernando had been issued his permits — a process supposedly sped up thanks to his close relationships with various politicians in the area — he put fences up to stop the family from accessing their crops, installed security guards and began digging trenches to prepare the land for

construction, even threatening the family, González Mejía's family members said.

In just six months, Hernando had begun building a mini-city of 13,500 residential properties on El Quiñón. The area lacked the most basic services, such as water and electricity, and was located in front of a used tire dump and was crossed by a high tension power line. Yet, the development was given the unconditional go-ahead. The only objection came from the left-wing group United Left (IU—Izquierda Unida) on the local council, but they were in the minority.

The Anti-Corruption Office of the Public Prosecutor denounced the treatment of González Mejía family several months ago. In addition, the IU lodged a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office alleging influence-peddling in the case. Yet, Gonzalo González Mejía passed away without learning whether the family would ever own the land. His children continue the struggle, although now the best they can hope for is financial compensation, as Hernando got his way and began the building while the legal proceedings dragged on in court.

This is just one example of what many farmers have suffered as a result of the exploitation and the bargain basement sale of rural land, which is quickly rezoned for housing. In 2006, Spain was awash with reports of corruption in town planning, with European Union and Greenpeace reports rating Spain as one of the worst countries in terms of the number of illegal or dubious construction projects.

Cases like that of the González Mejía family have benefited a few builders and politicians, but have seriously hurt many others, most commonly rural farmers and new homebuyers. Real estate speculation also has led to an increase in real estate prices, meaning that most families in Spain work just to pay for their apartments, with the majority spending more than half of their incomes on mortgage payments.

Before the whistle was blown on all these scandals in 2006, the government had decided to make changes to the Land Use Act, precisely to avoid such cases as the Seseña development. Experts are adamant that there are still many parts of the law to be ironed out, however, in almost every province of Spain such cases of corruption currently exist. Every day newspaper headlines tell of such scandals, in which local leaders are usually implicated.

The Spanish citizens are tired of seeing politicians and construction companies become rich, while they must spend more than a half of their income on mortgage payments. Despite the new law, public opinion is that corruption will continue. There is a Spanish proverb that says “He who makes the law makes the trap.” Today there are many people who believe this proverb faithfully. The main issue is how to prevent a politician on a modest salary from succumbing to the astronomical sums an ambitious property developer can offer to grease a few palms.

