

The Anti Cannabis and the Partnership with the Media

**By Xhavit Shala
Tirana, May 10, 2006**

Media¹ is an indispensable partner in the fight against cannabis. It can get the message to the people that any one who cultivates, instigates, allows or benefits from the cultivation of narcotic plants will face the legal consequences for his actions.

Following is a conversation held at Zip show of Vision plus with journalists Rezart Xhaxhiu, Jonida Shehu and Edison Ypi that aimed at sensitizing the law enforcement structures and the public on the necessity of upholding and enforcing the law. The conversation was aired by Vision plus on May 10, 2006 at 22.30.

As the following conversation indicates, it is of great importance for the success of the anti cannabis effort that the journalists be themselves first of all informed about the challenges of fighting cannabis cultivation. This is very important in view of the fact that they are the ones who influence the public opinion.

The Difficult anti cannabis partnership with Vision + Zip TV program

Rezart Xhaxhiu: Isn't the penalization of commune mayors an extreme measure and are they to bear the blame for the cultivation of cannabis? This is the question I would like to ask our guest tonight. He is Xhavit Shala and is director of the Albanian Center for National Security Studies, former director of the Criminal Police, former director of Fier Region Police, otherwise called the anti cannabis man. Good evening Mr. Shala and welcome to "Zip"!

Xhavit Shala: Good evening!

Rezart Xhaxhiu: I would like to make a short introduction to one of the many books that Mr. Shala has published. It is titled "Between Anti-cannabis and cannabis politics". We will talk tonight about this interesting publication, a result of a several years long work carried out by Mr. Shala.

Getting back to our conversation, Mr. Shala do you think there is a tendency to take extreme measures against the mayors of commune, when it is the State Police that should better perform its duty?

Xhavit Shala: The recent legal amendments that the government has proposed

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are a result of a situation that has been created and passed on year after year in Albania. The situation now is such that these measures are necessary. And there are a series of reasons that necessitate these measures. Albania is today one of the fourth biggest cannabis suppliers of the European Union. With Morocco being the biggest supplier, followed then respectively by Albania, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Edison Ypi: Are you saying that we produce as much cannabis as Morocco?

Xhavit Shala: Morocco is in the first place, followed then respectively by Albania, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Albanian cannabis products are in high demand also because of its good quality. It is a product certified by international criminal organization and is freely exchanged today with heroine.

Jonida Shehu: Mr. Shala, let me get back to the point. We know how big of a problem cannabis is in Albania. However, the question that we raise is why can't the police deal and resolve this issue and why does the Police have an effective control of the territory?

Xhavit Shala: One of the reasons why Albania continues to this day, after 15 years since the introduction of democracy, to be labeled as a cannabis producing country is that the fight against cannabis has been legally perceived as a task only for the police. This is the main underlying reason for this failure. The fight against crime, and especially against such massive crime phenomena, it is a duty for all of the society; it is a duty that is shared together by the state structures, the local government with the police being in the vanguard of this effort.

Jonida Shehu: I am not disputing this. But why is it impossible for the police to do that?

Xhavit Shala: It is not an issue that the police can not do it. The police have made efforts and will make even more. But if you have a commune with five villages cultivating cannabis a single policeman or a whole police station can not do anything about it alone. Unless the public becomes aware that the cultivation of cannabis is a criminal activity, the police alone can not be effective.

Edison Ypi: Mr. Shala, I will ask for your permission to play a little bit the devil's advocate as a function of the reason why we are here tonight, to tell the Albanian what they want to know. This gets more complicated than that. The police are specialized to identify the cases of cannabis cultivation. What is to be done if there is cultivation of cannabis in a remote area the mayor knows nothing about and then he is arrested for failing to take action? The mayor has not had time to even see this plot of land while the police has the tools, can use helicopters and other means to find it. So can you really defend this law in the view of what I am saying? I do not know if I was clear with my question.

Xhavit Shala: The question is very clear. Media should be one of the partners in the efforts against crime and it should play this role. The fight against cannabis should be perceived as a duty not only of the police, but yours also, of the society at large. This is the first point. Secondly, no one is blaming the mayor of the commune if somewhere deep in his territory, where he has never been or had reason to go, there is a case of cannabis cultivation.

Edison Ypi: Does the law make such a distinction? Because he can go to prison...

Xhavit Shala: The mayor of a commune will be penalized if he is aware or has come in possession of information that in the plots of arable land in the territory of his commune there is cannabis being cultivated, and he has allowed it and has not reported the case to the police.

Edison Ypi: This is very subjective. One can say this, another one can say something else.

Xhavit Shala: It is not subjective at all. We are not interpreting the law here. But if you would like we can do that also. But the problem should be seen at the heart of it.

Edison Ypi: But isn't this the heart?

Xhavit Shala: No, it is not. The point is that the cultivation of cannabis should not be allowed. This is the essence. Crime should not be tolerated. And to fight this massive criminal phenomenon all should work together, the local government and the community also.

Edison Ypi: True.

Xhavit Shala: And to work together means ...

Edison Ypi: Not all the local community should go to prison...

Xhavit Shala: We can not see this issue in this light ...

Jonida Shehu: The cultivation of cannabis is a serious crime, and so is murder. But should the mayors of communes be punished for crimes that are even more serious than cannabis cultivation?

Xhavit Shala: Murdering, as we know, is not a massive phenomenon. Unlike cannabis cultivation that is a very massive activity. There have been cases identified in Albania where the mayors themselves, whole villages have cultivated it. It is for this reason that it has become a massive phenomenon that more serious measures should be taken against it. And there is nothing new in this approach. This same strategy that is being applied now has been very successfully executed in the region of Fier in 2001.

Edison Ypi: Mr. Shala, the cultivation of cannabis by the mayor is not the same with the mayor reporting his neighbor to the police.

Xhavit Shala: The mayor of the commune shared the responsibility with the police in fighting crime. And not just against cannabis but against other similar activities also.

Edison Ypi: Are they taking the functions of the police now...

Xhavit Shala: No, it is not taking the functions of the police. The fight against crime in our days should be perceived in a different light. The modern world fights crime by having a cooperation established between the police, local community, and local government structures.

Edison Ypi: Correct.

Xhavit Shala: The consequences from this criminal activity, if allowed to continue, are paid by the community, the police and the mayor together.

Edison Ypi: But no prison sentence is provided for the members of the community. Where is the basis of this provision?

Xhavit Shala: There is an article in the Criminal Code, titled failure to report a crime. If a person knows that cannabis is being cultivated and does not report it or covers it up he has committed a criminal offense. This article is in the Criminal Code. Such an issues that is being dealt today by this law, was resolved through a different strategy in Fier in 2001.

Edison Ypi: What was this strategy?

Xhavit Shala: By studying the causes of why the cultivation of cannabis had reached to such high levels (50 per cent of the cannabis in Albanian was cultivated in the region of Fier), we reached the conclusion that one of the main shortcomings in the fight against cannabis was the fact that this effort was viewed only as a work for the police to carry out. And it was this view that we made efforts to correct. Making the community and the local government part of the effort to fight cannabis cultivation in cooperation with the state police is crucial for the success of the effort. As Regional Police Director, together with the heads of the police commissariats, we asked the heads of communes to support us in this effort and, as a matter of fact, they did provide us with this support.

I followed the comment of Mr. Kujtim Sherifi, Mayor of Cakran, which you aired. Despite the political force that he stands for, and I do not want to comments on his remarks, but I would like to say that it was this gentlemen who has fully supported us in the campaign against the cultivation of narcotic plants.

Edison Ypi: How were you able to stop it, then?

Xhavit Shala: It did not stop. But the cultivation in the region of Fier has consistently been decreasing.

Edison Ypi: It still is?

Xhavit Shala: Yes, is being decreased.

Edison Ypi: But which are the areas where it has grown?

Xhavit Shala: While in the region of Fier during that year the cultivation decreased by 34 times, in the region of Vlore it grew by 70 times. There can not be an effective anti-cultivation effort if it is a fragmentary one. This effort should be coordinated and implemented across the country, from Saranda to Shkodra at the same time.

Edison Ypi: Let them pass the law then.

Rezart Xhaxhiu: Mr. Shala, in spite of what Mr. Berisha said, many people have and will continue to cultivate cannabis in order to survive. What will happen to these families if they can no longer cultivate cannabis? Shouldn't the state compensate them with investment in infrastructure, and aid for these families that gain their income from this activity?

Xhavit Shala: The state does not compensate individuals for the revenue that is generated from criminal activity. Southern Italy is the poorest area of Italy and it is so because of the existence of the Mafia. We should not allow the cannabis mafia to keep these areas always poor. The State has the obligation to invest. It should provide help with loans. But no one should think that if the state does not resolve these problems then these people are justified in their decision to cultivate cannabis. Cannabis cultivation is prohibited also by the international conventions we are a party to. We aspire to enter into the European Union and are monitored around the clock. Imagine what a European parliament member will think, when we will need his vote to approve the integration of Albania into the EU, when he sees the massive cultivation of cannabis across the rural areas in Albania. All of the media and civil society should mobilize in the effort against cultivation.

Jonida Shehu: I agree with the logic that local government officials should help the effort against cannabis cultivation. But should they be sentenced when it is not very easy to prove whether they were or not aware of the cases of cultivation...

Xhavit Shala: You should rest assured that no one will bring a case against a head of commune if he is not aware of the issue.

Jonida Shehu: Does this draft law then rest on the assumption that most of the mayors are aware and cooperate with the cultivators?

Xhavit Shala: Most of the mayors are conscious of the fact that the phenomenon of cultivation should be stopped. What I am saying is that the strategy that we implemented in Fier now is put on a legal foundation and I assure you that this effort will now be very successful. Cannabis grows to two meters within two months and that's why no one can lie about it. This is the reason why I am convinced that this strategy will be successful.

Jonida Shehu: Are you sure that all the mayors at least know what cannabis looks like?

Xhavit Shala: Yes, they do know what it looks like. We have had a case, is a funny one at that, when in a village of Fier a search was carried out and a quantity of cannabis was found. People at that time did not possess enough information on the fact that this was a criminal offense. An old woman asked: "Why are you stopping us to grow this grass?" For her cannabis was just grass. People had not been properly informed that this "grass" was a narcotic plant and that cultivating it was a criminal activity punishable by law. We distributed to every house brochures that contained detailed information for the citizens.

Edison Ypi: Mr. Shala, please turn this way. Is it true that cannabis has grown even in the terraces of our apartments?

Xhavit Shala: I would not be surprised if it has. In the heart of Rome, media was reporting that a person was found growing 18 plants of cannabis in his balcony.

Rezart Xhaxhiu: Our department of Information asked viewers to write and provide their opinion on whether punishing mayors where cannabis is cultivated was a just measure or not.

Jonida Shehu: From the responses we have the following result: 40.74% are in favor of the draft law, while 59% are against the draft law and consider it wrong.

Xhavit Shala: The 59 % figure will change if the media also cooperates in the effort against cannabis.

Rezart Xhaxhiu: How can the media cooperate as you mentioned this idea several times? What can the media do?

Xhavit Shala: The media has an extraordinary role to play and I am speaking here based on my experience. When I served in the region of Fier we received full support from the media. We were able to distribute through the media information. I think that the viewers who are against the draft law do not possess sufficient information. The media should support the police in this effort and also encourage the local government in putting their hands behind this effort also. And the 59 per cent who are not yet convinced of the values of this law will soon be in favor of the draft law when they

will come in possession of sufficient information.

Jonida Shehu: A viewer says that shouldn't the Prime Minister be prosecuted, because while he says that there are 15 communes where cannabis is cultivated, why does he not go to Lazarat?

Xhavit Shala: The Prime Minister is the head of the majority which has the political responsibility to eradicate cultivation. With the proposed legal amendments he has demonstrated the strong political will of the majority to stamp out the cultivation. Local government structures, wherever they may be, in Cakran, Lazarat or elsewhere, of whatever political affiliation, understand clearly and know the cost if they do not become part of the effort against the cultivation of narcotic plants.

Jonida Shehu: Another viewer says that mayors that possess information on cultivation should be penalized because they have their basis in Italy where they worked as cocaine peddlers, as is the case of one mayor here in Vlora.

Edison Ypi: Has this happened, Mr. Shala?

Xhavit Shala: I am sorry that the viewer is making a generalized statement. The mayors are the people who have gained the trust of the people and received their votes and they are not narcotic traffickers. The viewer should report the person he is speaking about. And if he does not have the courage to do this, he may anonymously provide information. If evidence is provided, the police will deal with the case. But it is not good to make generalized statement on all mayors.

Jonida Shehu: Another viewer says that the mayors do know the areas where cannabis is cultivated and they should find the methods to prevent the cultivation from happening.

Xhavit Shala: The mayors should understand their legal responsibility if they come in possession of information on cultivation of narcotic plants. And prevention is to be the focus of the work of police and local government officials. Once cultivated, the consequences are great: The farmer will be punished, the mayor and the police inspector will be penalized, if they knew about it. All of these structures should focus on making efforts to prevent cultivation.

Edison Ypi: I think you may be right, Mr. Xhavit.

Xhavit Shala: I am one hundred percent right.

Edison Ypi: No one can be a hundred percent right.

Xhavit Shala: I am right on this because I have personally implemented such a strategy.

Jonida Shehu: Another viewer says that with this draft law the only action left to take is to give mayors a police uniform and put them in the payroll of the Ministry of Interior.

Xhavit Shala: They already are in the payroll of the Ministry of Interior. This new organization is of great help in the effort against cannabis. The prefect of the region heads the working group that will run the effort against the cultivation. The prefect is under the Minister of Interior who also controls the director of the Police.

Rezart Xhaxhiu: Mr. Shala, I would like to thank you for your presence in our “Zip” show and especially for the timely and accurate information that you provided. And it couldn’t but be so since you are also the author of the book "Between Anti-cannabis and cannabis politics". Could you tell us in one sentence, due to our time limitation, something about this publication?

Xhavit Shala: well, here it is in one sentence: Playing politics with cannabis. Cannabis has been used as a political instrument in Albanian in the past. Cannabis cultivation has been allowed in exchange for votes. This book speaks about this issue.

Rezart Xhaxhiu: This was Xhavit Shala, director of the Albanian Center for National Security Studies, with whom we had this conversation during the first part of our “Zip” show.

