



Tokhang in North Caloocan: Weaponizing Local Governance, Social Disarticulation, and Community Resistance

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ABSTRACT. The article maps out the violent consequences of *tokhang*, the flagship anti-drug operations of the Duterte administration, in the three largest barangays in North Caloocan by exploring the difference between the anti-drug campaign before and after 2016, the uniqueness of tokhang and the dynamics between the national tokhang narrative, the participation of local government units (LGUs), and the spontaneous and organized response of citizens and people's organizations. Data were gathered mainly from official government sources such as police files and budget deliberations, field interviews, and information sourced from Caloocan-based people's organizations such as recorded testimonies from relatives of victims and residents who witnessed tokhang operations and documentations of protests mounted in opposition to tokhang. The paper argues that tokhang weaponized the LGU mandate by linking the anti-drug campaign with the mandate of drafting an anti-criminality action plan and the enforcement of peace and order programs. The ferocity of these operations resulted in a kind of "social disarticulation" among the residents of the communities, and as a response, residents have launched various protests and rights campaigns against these anti-drug operations.

KEYWORDS. tokhang · drug war · North Caloocan · local government units · Social Disarticulation · community resistance

INTRODUCTION

Tokhang is the combination of the Cebuano words *tuktok* (to knock on something) and *hangyo* (to request or appeal), thus tokhang is "[for] a law enforcer) to knock on a suspected drug trafficker or drug addict's home to persuade them to surrender and stop their illegal activities."¹

1. Wiktionary, s.v. "tokhang," last modified October 8, 2019, 13:23, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/tokhang>.

As a government initiative, Project Tokhang, or simply tokhang, is one of the two operations carried out to execute the Philippine National Police (PNP) Anti-Illegal Drugs Campaign Plan—Project Double Barrel—which involves the “the conduct of house to house visitations to persuade suspected illegal drug personalities to stop their illegal drug activities.” This definition can be found in the Philippine National Police Command Memorandum Circular No. 16-2016, PNP Anti-Illegal Drugs Campaign Plan - Project: “Double Barrel,” July 1, 2016.

This article seeks to map out the violent consequences of tokhang in North Caloocan, specifically in the Tala, Camarin, and Bagong Silang communities. These represent the biggest barangays in Caloocan in terms of land area and population. Located in a resettlement zone for Manila’s informal settlers, these *barangays* (villages) collectively remain a mostly poor urban district. Caloocan’s main drug hot spot is in Phase 12 in Tala. Citizen protests against tokhang are also well-documented in these barangays. This study explores the difference between the antidrug campaign before and after 2016, the uniqueness of tokhang, and the dynamics among the national tokhang narrative, the participation of local government units (LGUs), and the spontaneous and organized response of citizen’s and people’s organizations.

Most studies and media reports focus on the high number of drug-related killings in 2016 and 2017 to highlight the aggressive implementation of tokhang and the violence it unleashed across the country. Investigative studies also document the president’s rabid articulation of his antidrug drive and how he mobilized the police to instill fear. This article looks into the interplay of national and local agencies in conducting tokhang operations at the community level. It will present several tokhang-related case studies as examples of the brutal effect of the so-called “war on drugs” on ordinary citizens. Through this enumeration of cases, the paper aims to demonstrate that the violence of tokhang is not determined solely by counting dead bodies but also by understanding how residents interpret, survive, and experience it. Thus, the paper delves into the sudden imposition of tokhang as a top-priority law-and-order measure and how its entanglement with the local socioeconomic and political conditions led to violent results. In particular, it probes the critical role of the city and barangay LGUs in enabling the localization of the president’s antidrug campaign, and seeks to unravel how violence is generated through the use of government laws and regulations, official and

unofficial interaction between state forces and the civilian population, and the president's fanatic sponsorship and defense of tokhang.

The paper also features the varied ways of how residents responded to tokhang. It documents how tokhang disrupted community ties involving the local population and state authorities, and it highlights the multiple acts of resistance of the community, especially the organized defiance against impunity killings.

THE RISE OF A FRONTIER CITY

There was a remote barrio in Manila during the early Spanish era called Aromahan located near the border of Tondo and Tambobong (now Malabon). From this *sulok* (corner), fisherfolk climbed the small hills to open homesteads which came to be known as Caloocan.

During the British occupation of Manila in 1762, Intramuros prisoners were set free and many of them sought refuge in Caloocan where they left a trail of violence and gave the place a notorious reputation.

But this peripheral zone also engendered resistance. Caloocan's first settlers were farmers from Hacienda de Maysilo who rose up against oppression. Andres Bonifacio's Katipunan signaled the start of the 1896 Revolution in Balintawak, which was then part of Caloocan territory.

Caloocan was geographically divided into two areas after its Novaliches and La Loma districts were made part of the envisioned new national capital called Quezon City in 1939.

The south part of Caloocan was the site of the country's first industrial zone, Grace Park, and remained a manufacturing center after World War II. A commercial area developed around the Bonifacio monument.

The north part of Caloocan marked the boundary between Metro Manila and Bulacan. In 1940, San Lazaro Hospital established a leprosarium in the Tala area covering 808 hectares. Family members of health workers and outpatients of the hospital helped in developing the Tala community by cultivating fields, planting vegetables, and building houses.

In April 1971, President Ferdinand Marcos issued Presidential Decree 843 creating the 575.5-hectare Bagong Silang Resettlement Project, which included a big portion of the Tala Estate. It was

designated as a relocation area for Manila's informal settlers which explains why some parts of the community are named after the areas where the settlers used to live (e.g., Zoto, Dagat-dagatan, La Loma, Little Baguio, and Munting Nayan).

But after some years, many housing lots remained vacant, since the intended relocatees could not find livelihood and employment opportunities in a community that is several hours away from Metro Manila's main commercial and business centers. Furthermore, poor infrastructure and the absence of basic services discouraged the arrival of settlers and them accessing the government's socialized housing projects in Bagong Silang and nearby Camarin.

During the early 1990s, urban poor groups organized the occupation of empty lots in Bagong Silang and constructed their own houses. They cleared muddy lands, cleaned the settlement, and established various community associations.

North Caloocan soon acquired disrepute for being a haven of persons with Hansen's disease, squatter colonies, and criminal gangs, and as a dumping ground of dead bodies and "salvaged" victims, i.e. those killed by unknown assailants, though the suspicion is often on government agents.

Eventually, despite its ill reputation, settlers started to populate Bagong Silang and other areas of North Caloocan, coinciding with the sharp increase in the rate of urbanization in the country's National Capital Region. This was also the time when demolitions in the central commercial areas of Metro Manila in the 1990s pushed urban poor residents to the peripheries of the region, most notably in North Caloocan. The transformation of the area is exemplified by Camarin's Barangay 178, which now has a large residential community and a bustling commercial center. In the past, it used to be a dumpsite before it was occupied by urban poor residents. Recently, a Korean investor bought this piece of land. He intends to build a columbarium in the area.

As of 2014, Bagong Silang or Barangay 176 is the country's biggest barangay unit with a population of 243,878 or about 16 percent of the city's total population. This is already the size of a municipal unit and congressional district in the Philippines.

In drafting a medium-term development program in 2016, the city government cited the "continuous illegal construction and uncontrolled proliferation of informal settler families at a vast [tract] of land which is privately owned but unidentified lot owner and abandoned lot" as

a major issue of concern in North Caloocan. Based on 2013 data, Caloocan has 54,953 informal settler families, which accounts for 17.19 percent of the population, and of which 78.57 percent are in North Caloocan. It is estimated that North Caloocan settlers who do not have formal ownership/land rights/rental agreement occupy 578.8 hectares of land. The local government has categorized this group of residents as “rent-free households.”

Despite being the third most populated city in Metro Manila, Caloocan in 2014 only ranked thirteenth in terms of the number of registered businesses, which reflects the lower number of employment options for the local labor population. But within Caloocan, there is a huge disparity in the quality of living, economic profile, and delivery of services between the north and the south. In 2013, around 73 percent of total registered commercial establishment are in the south. About 62.7 percent of vocational and technical schools providing training to young adults are also concentrated in the south. There is a manufacturing hub in the north, located along Llano Road near Novaliches and Victoria Wave near Tala, but they are inadequate to meet the burgeoning labor force.

The north only has twenty-three health centers and its ratio to the local population is 1:47,116. With 397 hospital beds, its ratio to the population is registered at 1:2,573. During the 2014–2015 school year, North Caloocan had 106,565 elementary students with a classroom-student ratio of 1:84. It had 62,295 high school students with a classroom-student ratio of 1:90. South Caloocan has a slightly better classroom-student ratio. The local government has acknowledged that the severe classroom shortage has forced schools to adopt three shifts for their classes, putting a strain on the health conditions of students and teachers.

What these socioeconomic indicators signify is that despite the implementation of so-called modernization initiatives in the city, North Caloocan continues to lag owing to years, if not decades, of neglect. Poverty, homelessness, corruption, and joblessness plague the north, which lead to rampant criminality, including the proliferation of illegal drug operations.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

The researcher initially relied on media reports in exploring the impact of tokhang in North Caloocan. Verifying data with official government

sources, especially at the LGU level, posed some challenges and difficulties. The Caloocan City Police Headquarters was burned down on November 14, 2017, and only administrative case files were saved. The PNP has insisted that only the president can authorize the release of data pertaining to tokhang operations in every barangay. Additional Electronic Freedom of Information (eFOI) requests sent to the PNP were also rejected. The case of Lenin Baylon, a ten-year-old from Camarin who died from a gunshot wound illustrates the difficulty of ascertaining the real number of tokhang victims in the city and elsewhere. For the relatives to retrieve his body from the funeral parlor, they were asked by the authorities to agree to alter the cause of death to pneumonia.

But through informal channels, some pertinent data from LGU offices were acquired, while the 2018 budget deliberations in the House of Representatives also yielded relevant documents related to tokhang. Members of Caloocan-based people's organizations gave valuable support in conducting field interviews and soliciting information from various sources in North Caloocan. They recorded testimonies from relatives of victims and residents who witnessed tokhang operations. They also have previous documentation of how tokhang was introduced in the community and the protests they mounted in opposition to this. They served as the primary reference and guide in explaining the geographical complexities of North Caloocan, the varied responses of barangays after tokhang was implemented, and the "social disarticulation" it caused in the community. Due to security concerns, some specific information pertaining to individuals and groups in the communities discussed in the paper are withheld.

There were numerous anecdotal references in mainstream and social media about tokhang killings in North Caloocan, which the research attempted to substantiate and analyze. In the end, the paper only cited cases which were personally known to grassroots organizers. These cases were evaluated in relation to their relevance in understanding the LGU role in implementing the police-led tokhang campaign and their long-term impact on the community. The paper focused on tokhang-related incidents which took place from July 2016 up to December 2017, but it also scrutinized government rulings and independent listing of tokhang-related deaths until the start of the midterm election period in early 2019.

TOKHANG IN NUMBERS

The number of drug-related killings in Caloocan is lower (373) compared to the number of fatalities for Quezon City (400) and Manila (463) as of June 2018, yet Caloocan is consistently touted as the “ground zero” of tokhang killings (David et al. 2018, table 2). Perhaps it is related to Caloocan’s previous reputation as a dangerous frontier, but this could be more likely related to high-profile tokhang cases in the city such as the killing of Kian Loyd delos Santos. The gruesome killing of seventeen-year-old Kian in a drug operation was perhaps the most publicized testament to the reckless and abusive nature of tokhang due to CCTV footage and eyewitness accounts that run counter to the policemen’s claim that he resisted arrest (Bartolome 2018). Instead, Kian was seen being helplessly dragged by the police and, moments before being shot multiple times, was seen pleading for his life. His death, more than sparking widespread condemnation, opened an investigation of the drug war in the Senate, and even drew international attention to the bloody war. The investigation of the policemen implicated in the murder of Kian ran for two years but it has nonetheless concluded with the perpetrators being brought to justice.

Alongside Kian’s death was that of South Korean businessman Jee Ick Joo, who was reportedly arrested in a tokhang operation, killed inside Camp Crame (the national headquarters itself of the PNP), was cremated in a funeral parlor in Caloocan that is owned by a retired cop, and his ashes flushed down the toilet.

These two cases triggered widespread public outrage and forced President Rodrigo Duterte to suspend tokhang. The case of Carl Angelo Arnaiz, another teenager who was allegedly tortured and killed by Caloocan police, also sustained protests against tokhang.

LGU support for tokhang in Caloocan is also highly visible and concrete. The Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) has been citing Caloocan as a model LGU in terms of its support to the government’s campaign against illegal drugs.

It is also in Caloocan where grassroots-based spontaneous and organized protests against tokhang directly and consistently challenged the police and the government’s justification about the rampant drug-related extrajudicial killings. Then, Kian’s case led to numerous protest actions which put the spotlight on the extent of tokhang operations in the city.

But data from the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) confirm that Caloocan is not the priority of its antidrug campaign. There were only eighty-eight PDEA-led barangay operations in Caloocan from July 2016 to September 2018 compared to 362 in Quezon City and 453 in Manila. Joint operations involving PDEA and other agencies covered only ten barangays in Caloocan compared to 103 in Manila and 570 in Quezon City.

Meanwhile, PNP data from December 2017 to June 2018 showed that the local PNP was more active than PDEA in Caloocan. It covered 101 barangays in Caloocan compared to 73 in Quezon City and 106 in Manila. Caloocan has 188 barangays.

The police put the number of drug pushers in Caloocan at 6,500 compared to more than 50,000 for Manila and Quezon City, respectively. But the Caloocan police seemed more aggressive because despite the city's lower number of suspected drug personalities, it netted 18,753 drug surrenderees compared to 20,714 in Quezon City and 49,000 in Manila.

The 2017 DILG report cited the government's increased drug operations for the lowering of crime incidences in 2016 and 2017, but it admitted that homicide cases went up by 11 percent. There were 2,336 homicide cases in 2016 compared to 2,592 in 2017 for a total of 4,928. But an eFOI report by the PNP recorded 5,882 homicide cases from July 2016 to March 2017.

Despite pegging the number of homicide cases between 2016 and 2017 to less than 6,000, the PNP reported in September 2018 that the number has reached 25,000. This puts into question their claim of crime deterrence by the so-called war on drugs.

The government's "real numbers" infographics showed 2,235 drug-related homicide cases from July 2016 until January 2018. This went up to 2,903 in September 2018 according to a PNP report submitted to the House of Representatives. The breakdown of homicide cases which are not drug-related showed 3,369 incidents linked to "heated arguments" and 5,666 incidents caused by "personal grudges." But how many of these nondrug-related cases included tokhang cases that were misreported as homicide under investigation? In a letter addressed to the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives dated September 11, 2018, Police Director Elmo Sarona of the PNP Investigation and Detective Management clarified that the category "homicide cases under investigation" or HCUI refers to all killings outside police operations:

TABLE 1. Legal bases for the role of local government units in implementing tokhang

Date	Issuances	Agency
August 3, 2016	Board Regulation No. 1, Series of 2016 - Guidelines in the Implementation of Operation: "Lawmen"	Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB)
August 3, 2016	Board Regulation No. 3, Series of 2016 - Guidelines on Handling Voluntary Surrender of Drug Personalities	DDB
September 19, 2016	Board Regulation No. 4, Series of 2016 - Oplan Sagip - Guidelines on Voluntary Surrender of Drug Users and Dependents and Monitoring Mechanism of Barangay Anti-Drug Abuse Campaigns	DDB
October 11, 2016	Executive Order No. 4 Providing for the Establishment and Support of Drug Abuse Treatment and Rehabilitation Centers Throughout the Philippines	Office of the President of the Philippines (OP)
February 14, 2017	Board Regulation No. 3 Series of 2017: Strengthening the Implementation of Barangay Drug Clearing Program	DDB
April 3, 2017	Memorandum Circular No. 2017-58 - Board Regulation No. 3 Series of 2017 re: Strengthening the Implementation of Barangay Drug Clearing Program	Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG)
April 27, 2017	Memorandum Circular No. 2017-64 - Compliance to Peace and Order and Anti-Illegal Drug Related Issuances	DILG
May 22, 2017	Memorandum Circular No. 2017-67 - Amending DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2017-64, Entitled "Compliance to Peace and Order and Anti-Illegal Drug Related Issuances"	DILG
August 30, 2017	Ordinance No. 0699 S.2017 - An Ordinance Creating an Office for the Caloocan Anti-Drug Abuse (OCADA) and for Other Purposes.	Caloocan City Council
October 10, 2017	Memorandum from the President - Implementation of Republic Act 9165 otherwise known as the "Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002"	OP

TABLE 1 (continued)

Date	Issuances	Agency
May 21, 2018	Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2018-01 - Implementing Guidelines on the Functionality and Effectiveness of Local Anti-Drug Abuse Councils	DILG-DDB
August 8, 2018	Memorandum Circular No. 2018-125 - Guidelines for the Implementation of Community-Based Drug Rehabilitation Program	DILG

From July 1, 2016 to September 3, 2018, a total of 25,564 HCUI were recorded by the PNP, of which 14,683 were already solved and cleared while 10,881 are still under investigation. However, based on the investigation conducted on these cases, *no case was tagged as “vigilante killings.”* (emphasis added)

In another letter submitted to the Committee on Appropriations dated October 2, 2018—but this time by PNP Director General Oscar Albayalde—the police is categorically asserting that no tokhang-related vigilante killing has been reported in Metro Manila.

These two letters suggest that the oft-repeated 25,000 tokhang killings in media reports are actually categorized as HCUI. But on the other hand, the letters also undermine the argument put forward by the police that many of the drug-related killings are done by vigilantes.

WEAPONIZING THE LGU MANDATE

Tokhang did not create a new mechanism that would legitimize the increased participation of barangay units and city governments in the campaign against illegal drugs. Tokhang made use of existing laws and regulations to require the presence of LGU units in all phases of tokhang operations. For example, the revitalization of Barangay Anti-Drug Abuse Councils (BADACs) was done through a DILG memo signed by Secretary Mar Roxas on June 16, 2015. Also, the creation of local Anti-Drug Abuse Councils (ADACs) was pushed as early as 1998. What made tokhang unique is the linking of the antidrug campaign with the LGU mandate of drafting an anticriminality action plan and the enforcement of peace and order programs.

The PNP *Manual on Barangay Peacekeeping Operations and Barangay Peacekeeping Action Team*, published in 2009, mentioned the value of *ronda* (patrol) operations as a community peacekeeping activity because of the involvement of community members. Barangay officials and *tanod* members (barangay peace and security officers) are described as “force multipliers” in the daily peacekeeping activities under the supervision of a PNP officer. The manual categorized barangays as internal security operations-affected, crime-prone areas, religious conflict-affected, and affected by Muslim separatism. There is no separate category for drug-affected barangays. But under the DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2017-58, Board Regulation No. 3 Series of 2017 issued April 3, 2017, barangays are already classified whether they are drug-affected and if they are seriously affected, moderately affected, or slightly affected.

Tokhang appears to be the repackaging of the *ronda* operations involving PNP elements and barangay officials focused on eliminating the drug menace at the community level. The barangay LGUs are enjoined, through ADACs, to support and implement the five stages of tokhang: collection and validation of information, coordination, house-to-house visitation, processing and documentation, and monitoring and evaluation. In fact, the PNP’s Command Memorandum Circular No. 16-2016, otherwise known as the Double Barrel memo issued on July 1, 2016, reminded designated team leaders to ensure the presence of ADAC members in all tokhang operations.

To boost compliance, PNP directives are supplemented by guidelines issued by DILG and the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) (table 1). These memos mandated barangays to provide not just a supporting role but a crucial responsibility in implementing tokhang. Consider the following tasks of barangay LGUs:

- For the preoperations of tokhang, barangay LGUs are required to submit information about drug personalities. This will be coordinated with the PNP which maintains not just one master list but several files which are categorized as the target list, wanted list, and watch list.
- BADACs process the voluntary surrender of drug personalities. They will make an initial assessment whether the surrenderee is eligible for community-based rehabilitation or whether the PNP should pursue the information provided by the individual.

- In the DILG memo issued in April 2017, BADACs are authorized to conduct “administrative searches” (regulatory inspection) of drug dens in order to strengthen the government’s barangay drug clearing operations. Again, this indicates that the role of barangay LGUs in implementing tokhang is more than just assisting the PNP but participating in actual operations.
- Aside from joining law enforcement agencies during tokhang operations, BADACs are asked to sign the inventory of seized drugs and drug paraphernalia and serve as a witness during legal proceedings.
- Again, during the operation phase of tokhang, BADACs can arrest identified drug users/pushers through “citizen’s arrest” in a buy-bust operation and serve search warrants.

Of note is the barangay officials’ role in handling those who are involved with illegal drugs. Surrenderers sign a waiver as facilitated by the BADACs. The waiver authorizes government agencies to conduct not just a physical examination of the surrenderer but also to make a background investigation and gives it power to access the available personal records of the individual. A surrenderer, whether a user or pusher, is considered a suspect who may have committed other crimes. Aside from the interview, authorities can confiscate the surrenderer’s phone to scan for more information. This is stipulated in DDB Board Regulation No. 3, series of 2016, dated August 3, 2016: “If the result of the initial interview is actionable, the surrenderer may be requested to submit his/her cellular phones for forensic examination to obtain more data and to support his/her voluntary confession.”

The waiver becomes a legal instrument that enables the intrusion into the private lives of drug personalities, including mere habitual users of illegal drugs. It requires the surrenderer to report once a week for a period of six months while undergoing random drug testing. BADACs assist in the weekly monitoring of the status and whereabouts of surrenderers and drug personalities. This is supposed to be a rehabilitation process, but, in practice, it normalizes the criminalization of a social issue, which in many countries is considered a health problem.

The administrative instruments devised by national authorities sometimes go even beyond the case of the surrenderers and the role of barangay officials in anti-illegal drugs campaign. Ordinary citizens are

enjoined to do surveillance work. In tandem with the MASA MASID program,² the guidelines by DDB issued through its Board Regulation No. 3, series of 2017, dated February 14, 2017 engender citizen surveillance. Community residents are encouraged to report drug-related cases through an award or commendation system, or both, under the program of strengthening barangay drug clearing operations.

Issued by the DDB on August 3, 2016, Operation Lawmen is “the reward or award program for law enforcers or members of the anti-illegal drug units/teams or task forces, including the support unit/s.” This could be the bounty system referred to in news reports about police operatives running after a quota of tokhang operations in exchange for monetary rewards, hence the implementation of this program must be probed in relation to the increase in antidrug operations involving law enforcement agencies with support from LGUs.

Did Barangays Comply?

Since July 2016, the researcher counted at least eight memos issued by the DILG and DDB requiring LGUs from the provincial to the barangay levels to allot funding for the operation of ADACs. There are two ways to interpret this: the government is committed to succeed in fighting illegal drugs by guaranteeing the cooperation of LGUs, which explains the repeated instructions to fund ADACs; on the other hand, it can also mean that not all LGUs are providing counterpart funds in support of tokhang guidelines like the creation of ADACs at the minimum. The memo issued by DILG in May 21, 2018, Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2018-0 provided detailed guidelines on how ADACs should operate, the local legislations that LGUs should

2. The MASA MASID (Mamamayang Ayaw Sa Anomalya, Mamamayang, [sic] Ayaw sa Iligal na Droga [Citizens Against Anomalies, Citizens Against Illegal Drugs]) Program is an initiative of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) codified in DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2016-116, Implementation of MASA MASID, that seeks to institutionalize the voluntary participation of private actors and CSOs in enforcing President Duterte’s war against crime, corruption, and, most importantly, illegal drugs at the community level. It seeks to accomplish its objectives through a three-part implementation strategy done at the local level which involves: intensified advocacy and education campaigns, establishing a reporting mechanism for gathering information on illegal drug activities; and a Community-Based Rehabilitation Program (CBRP).

pass in support of ADACs, the reporting mechanism between ADACs and other national government agencies, and funding requirements to sustain the work of ADACs.

But forcing all LGUs to prioritize the funding of ADACs can put greater pressure on the management of local revenues, which are often inadequate to finance the basic needs of constituents, especially social services such as education, health, and housing. Instead of helping the community, this could heighten instability because local resources intended to aid the vulnerable segments of the population are diverted to fund the bureaucratic support system for tokhang operations.

On July 25, 2018, the DILG organized a workshop attended by Metro Manila councilors wherein the agency presented its assessment of the negative public feedback with regard to the government's antidrug campaign. A DILG official blamed the lack of LGU support for tokhang in terms of establishing institutional mechanisms intended to boost the government's antidrug campaign. The same official also warned LGUs of possible sanctions if ADACs are not created and funded and local legislations are not passed to support tokhang operations. This threat reflects the failure of DILG and other national government agencies to get the absolute support of LGUs. Also, it highlights how the controversial features of tokhang are causing contradictions between government units. The workshop cited several LGUs that are providing exemplary support to the government's antidrug campaign. One of these LGUs is the city of Caloocan.

Caloocan as Role Model

For many years, Phase 12 in Barangay 188, Tala, was known as North Caloocan's drug den, where a shabu laboratory existed. It remained a drug hot spot despite the change of leadership in the city's LGU. After the electoral victory of Duterte, Phase 12 became one of the first areas targeted by tokhang operations, which led to the killing of its barangay captain and most of the *kagawads* (councilors). After this, the antidrug operations spread from Phase 12 to other areas of North Caloocan.

Tokhang operations implied LGU support and this was evident in Caloocan. Consider the following:

- In 2014 and 2015, the city's antidrug campaign primarily consisted of conducting seminars and sports activities through the Office of the Vice Mayor with no specified

funding. In 2016, PHP 300,000.00 was allocated for the said activities. In August 2017, the city strengthened the Caloocan Anti-Drug Abuse Office (more popularly known as OCADA, probably referring to Mayor Oscar “Oca” Malapitan) by passing an ordinance allotting funds for its staffing requirements. The city’s proposed 2019 budget includes PHP 11.2 million for a drug rehabilitation center and PHP 49.5 million for OCADA. Caloocan’s proposed ordinance with a substantial amount of funding for OCADA was the city’s direct endorsement of DILG’s order to revitalize ADACs.

- Barangay LGUs were given explicit instructions by the city government to cooperate with the PNP’s tokhang operations. A formal assembly was called by Mayor Malapitan on February 26–28, 2017, which gathered all barangay captains to meet PNP Caloocan about the implementation of tokhang.
- City councilors were discouraged from providing burial assistance and visiting the wake of tokhang victims.
- After the death of Kian in August 2017, the city government organized ronda operations composed of barangay officials with tanod members, police, and assigned city councilors per zone and barangays to implement ordinances banning the selling of liquor to minors (passed in November 2005), regulating the use of videoke and karaoke machines (passed in November 2016), and mandating new curfew hours for children (passed in August 2017). The ronda lasted for almost a month, where the combined forces of PNP and the LGU conducted checkpoints and barangay visits every night after 10:00 p.m. It was meant to express LGU support to the PNP, despite the backlash after the killing of Kian, and to justify the arrest of minors while tokhang operations were being undertaken.
- Despite the announcement of the Department of Education about its refusal to conduct mandatory drug tests, some Caloocan schools initially tried to proceed with this but were stopped by parents who objected to this scheme. In some schools, such as the Cielito Zamora High School Annex, students from Grades 7 to 10 were

required to sign a waiver informing them and their families of the random drug testing which can be conducted by the school.

TOKHANG KILLINGS

Below are the high-profile drug-related killings in North Caloocan that signaled the government's aggressive implementation of tokhang. These killings reverberated across North Caloocan not only because they involved prominent barangay leaders but also because minors became collateral damage in the tokhang operations. Most of the killings were committed inside dense residential communities, suggesting that the killers were either familiar with the locality or were backed by a local network supplying them with ground information. Some of these cases were reported in mainstream media but there was little reference to their local significance and the aftermath of the killings.

***Nasampolan*³ The Killings of Barangay Officials**

Phase 12 in Barangay 188 is a notorious drug hot spot in North Caloocan. For many years, it was widely known as a drug lab yet it continued to operate despite the change of leadership in the city LGU. There is only one narrow passageway to this "gated community," which is also bordered by the Marilao River in the north, making it a suitable place to "cook" drugs and transport these goods to Bulacan and other parts of Central Luzon. On June 25, 2016, Barangay Captain Edres Romuros Domato was killed. Edres was a suspected operator or protector of the drug lab. His son Edison Domato, who was the barangay's number one kagawad, became the captain but was also killed in September 2016. Members of the Domato family soon left the community. The rest of the barangay kagawads were also killed until only one member of the council was left. As of January 2019, illegal drug transactions are still rampant in the area.

Barangay Captain Onofre "Obet" delos Santos of Caybiga was killed while presiding over a meeting of the Vista Verde Homeowners Association. Masked men entered the room and ordered everyone to bow their heads before shooting the village head. Onofre was a close

3. Targeted to serve as an example or warning to the community.

friend of Barangay Captain Edres Domato of Phase 12 who was killed for his alleged links to illegal drug operations.

Meanwhile, in Camarin, a barangay leader was killed beside a police station just minutes after he was seen talking to a police officer on patrol. A child got hit by a stray bullet, but the family was threatened with violence if they filed a complaint. The local leader was killed on January 12, 2017, the same period when barangay officials were being asked to submit names of suspected drug users, pushers, and other personalities.

***Nanlaban*⁴ Michael Librea**

The family of Michael Librea had been trying to contact him for two days before they found his dead body riddled with four bullets on July 30, 2017, at a funeral parlor in Norzagaray, Bulacan. The police said Michael resisted arrest (*nanlaban*) during a sting operation. His family denies that he is a drug dealer and they are questioning his inclusion in Bulacan's drug watch list, since he is from Barangay 170 in Caloocan. Michael's funeral was attended by hundreds of friends and residents from Diamante Subdivision, including motorcycle riders like him. Funeral marchers displayed banners and shouted slogans asserting Librea's innocence. This spontaneous display of dissent marked the first time that a protest against tokhang was held in the community.

***Napagkamalan*⁵ Jimmy Doble**

On October 3, 2016, Sitio 3 Camarin resident Jimmy Borrromeo Doble was killed by a "riding in tandem" (two men riding one motorcycle). His family insisted he was a victim of mistaken identity linked to a tokhang operation. Doble's funeral was attended by hundreds of community members wearing t-shirts with a printed message of "Justice." Since then, residents in the *eskinita* (alley) where Doble's family lives became more alert and vigilant by monitoring motorcyclists who are not from the community. Youth volunteers organized themselves into a self-defense unit posted at the narrow entrance and exit of Sitio 3.

4. A suspect who resisted arrest and assaulted the arresting officers.

5. Mistaken identity.

*Nadamay*⁶

Phase 8 Massacre

News reports mentioned a suspected drug pusher, Jay-R Santor, as the target of an alleged shootout on December 28, 2016, at Phase 8 in Bagong Silang. But the incident led to the killing of eight people, five of whom were minors, including an unborn child. The minors were Angelito Soriano (sixteen-years-old), Jonel Segovia (fifteen-years-old), and Sonny Espinosa (sixteen-years-old). The massacre site is in a place called Bagsak which refers to the “*bagsakan*” (dumping ground) of informal settlers in Bagong Silang. The other part of Phase 8 is called Balwarte (bastion) where there is reported rampant use of illegal drugs.

Redemptorist Brother Ciriaco Santiago⁷ was able to interview the family of the minors and offered this alternative narrative of what really happened that night. He called it the “massacre of the innocents”:

They had dinner. A karaoke machine added fun to the gathering. They were singing their hearts out. It was a happy and rousing night until a single gunshot stopped the singing and dancing. A group of armed masked men barged into the front door, followed by random open firing which instantly killed seven people inside. One of the victims was a young pregnant woman.

The wake was short. The victims’ families and relatives cannot afford a decent burial for their dead. Their option was to bury them all together—alongside each other. It was not a hard decision to make for the parents of three of them. Their parents knew that the boys would want to have it that way. It is their way of sealing their sons’ friendship, which they managed to keep until death.

During the burial, a large group of friends and fraternity brothers of the minors sang joyful songs and rap music as an expression of their mourning.

The killings at Phase 8 sparked outrage across North Caloocan and inspired residents to organize a protest march from the parish church to the community during the fortieth-day after-death memorial service on February 5, 2017. The protest was significant because it was the first

6. Got caught in the shootings.

7. For a feature on Brother Ciriaco Santiago, see Palatino 2017.

organized resistance against the violent impact of tokhang. During the march, some onlookers yelled at them and accused them of being “defenders of drug addicts.” But many also showed their approval and even barangay tanods were helpful during the march.

Lenin Baylon

Ten-year-old Lenin Baylon was playing with friends on a pathway in Phase 6 Camarin one morning when an antidrug operation erupted in their midst and rattled residents, forcing those in the streets to run for safety. During the alleged shootout, Lenin was hit by stray bullets on his leg and back. He was near his house when he met his father, Rodrigo, who started looking for his son after hearing gun shots. Lenin died in the arms of his father. Lenin’s family could not retrieve his body at the funeral parlor unless they agreed to change the cause of death to pneumonia. They were told that this was needed because they will not be able to get financial assistance from the local government if the death was linked to tokhang. They relented but only in order to get the body. After a few months, Lenin’s family was assisted by church groups and other human rights advocates in exhuming the remains of the boy in order to conduct an independent autopsy. In January 2018, they were able to petition and change the boy’s cause of death from pneumonia to gunshot wounds.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF TOKHANG

North Caloocan residents felt the impact of tokhang after the consecutive killings of Barangay 188 Phase 12 officials. This left the impression that notorious drug personalities were being singled out but many were still shocked by the daring methods used to kill the barangay officials. After the Phase 12 killings and the attacks against some barangay officials in the district, tokhang soon spread to other barangays and instantly created terror.

Another visible sign of a tokhang operation was the setting up of police checkpoints in almost all access roads of barangays. Police checkpoints were common in North Caloocan, but they were seen only in major roads in the Zabarte area and Congressional Road Extension that links the city to Bulacan. But this changed during the first few months of the Duterte government when police checkpoints became ubiquitous in nearly all barangays of North Caloocan. Some

motorcycle riders described the checkpoints as “Police 7-11” because they were often placed near 7-11 convenience stores, which were also expanding their branches in North Caloocan. The checkpoints were supposed to provide protection, but many residents felt harassed because of *kotong* (extortion) cops and the aggressive interrogation conducted by police patrols especially during tokhang operations.

Barangay units were tapped to provide the initial data about the extent of drug use and illegal drug trade in their jurisdictions. Their early role was to submit a drug list of users and pushers. During a human rights workshop organized by Ibon Foundation in May 2017, some barangay officials from North Caloocan expressed frustration because the drug watch list they compiled and forwarded to the police soon became a death list. They said they were torn between complying with the law and listening to their conscience. Barangays, which are traditional conduits for political patronage (read: pork barrel) especially in vote-rich North Caloocan, have been reoriented to prioritize the setting up of tokhang mechanisms at the grassroots level.

Tokhang disrupted many lives and communities. It saw the heavy deployment of police, the mobilization of erstwhile responsive and friendly barangay LGUs in implementing tokhang, incentivizing citizens to monitor their neighbors, while no less than the country’s president is providing the ideological arguments in running the drug war until it succeeds in weeding out society’s so-called undesirables.

Spontaneous public outrage against tokhang emerged when minors like Lenin Baylon were killed or neighbors became witnesses to brutal tokhang operations. Public perception against tokhang became more palpable after the massacre of three minors on December 28, 2016, in Phase 8. Protests and collective actions by people’s organizations within the district were openly organized in January 2017. Funeral marches turned into protests, rallies targeted police headquarters, and major street intersections in Tala, Bagong Silang, and Camarin became protest centers.

“Know Your Rights”

The “Phase 8 Massacre” in December 2016 jolted community activists into action. For the past six months, North Caloocan had been gripped with panic. The terror effect of news reports enumerating the spike of drug-related extrajudicial killings across the country was amplified by daily stories of tokhang raids, encounters, and shootouts in North Caloocan. Police deployments had been intensified, most

barangay leaders were dutifully submitting drug watch lists while those perceived to be uncooperative were being killed, and the whole community was seemingly placed under constant surveillance.

The first challenge was to address the fear of the people, including activists who were recalling the spate of killings during the Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo government. The next task was to organize a campaign that will mobilize the people without directly antagonizing agencies in charge of tokhang.

With these considerations in mind, the “Know Your Rights” lecture caravan was conceptualized by activist groups in the community such as Gabriela, Anakpawis, and Anakbayan. Later, they formed a broader network of concerned residents and sought legal aid from national human rights groups. Their first project was the launch of an education campaign that seeks to fight fear by empowering community members with knowledge about their human rights and protective laws in response to tokhang.

Through small group discussions and other information awareness activities, the campaign aimed to confront the violent impact of tokhang by uniting residents and organizing them in exposing the excesses of the police and the accountability of local and national authorities while affirming their rights as citizens.

A primer was prepared explaining the features of tokhang, its application in Caloocan and elsewhere, its victims and the threats it poses to ordinary citizens, the pertinent laws in asserting individual rights, and the importance of solidarity and collective response in order to survive and win against state brutality.

Activists in Tala comprised the first group to discuss the primer in January 2017. This inspired them to reach out to their family, friends, and neighbors in organizing study sessions. A paralegal team composed of nine individuals was formed to organize the lecture series.

Formal and informal discussions were held in houses, garages, basketball courts, daycare centers, alleys, church courtyards, and even barangay halls.

North Caloocan-based activists and church workers led the discussions while participants shared testimonies about their experience with tokhang. The lecture became an opportunity to exchange practical knowledge on what to do during a tokhang raid. It was presented through a simple Powerpoint presentation filled with diagrams and photos identifying the agencies and officials in charge of implementing

tokhang, the rise of drug-related killings in Caloocan, and a step-by-step guide in response to a tokhang operation.

A hotline was set up to spread information and provide access to residents who were interested in resisting tokhang but unable to join the lecture series.

Volunteers also provided counseling, legal advice, medical aid, and other forms of assistance to families of tokhang victims. They partnered with formations like the Stop the Killings network and Rise Up for Life and for Rights to sustain these activities.

After several months of conducting the education campaign, activists were finally able to mobilize community residents in protesting against tokhang in Bagong Silang, Tala, and Camarin. Protest centers were identified, which include public areas near busy intersections, police headquarters, and commercial centers.

The lecture series proved effective in countering the fear propagated by tokhang implementers. It helped in reviving and sustaining grassroots resistance not just against tokhang but other manifestations of state terror.

The campaign gained momentum and boosted the confidence of activists to hold a protest at PNP Caloocan headquarters in the South.

After many months of responding to tokhang incidents, news about the killing of teenager Kian delos Santos in the South made it easier for activists to form and deploy a campaign team to drumbeat the issue.

Before the case of Kian gained nationwide attention, people's organizations in North Caloocan were already articulating the situation in their communities in Manila-based multisectoral protests. Mass protests against Kian's killing saw various groups organizing activities in Caloocan to denounce tokhang.

The protests were impressive, since they challenged the prevailing view that tokhang is embraced without question by the local population. The campaign mobilized people to speak out, turned mourning into rage, and provided a space where residents can equip themselves with basic legal knowledge about defending themselves from illegal arrests. It served as a preemptive action against state-backed attacks targeting community members.

The 2017 protests in North Caloocan reflected the broader opposition against tokhang across the country. The community-based actions contributed to amplifying the voices denouncing the surge of drug-related killings. Overall, the national and local protests forced the

Duterte government to suspend tokhang while recalibrating its campaign against illegal drugs. But the protest organizers themselves acknowledged that the street actions and study sessions only reached a limited segment of the population in North Caloocan. Sustaining the momentum of the protests proved to be difficult. Localized protests became harder to organize after tokhang was suspended twice in 2017. Oplan Galugad targeting *tambays* (loiterers) in the same urban poor communities supplemented tokhang in 2018 but this did not lead to widespread protests.

A New Tokhang?

Despite the public outcry in 2016 and 2017 against tokhang killings, the government continued to insist that the campaign against illegal drugs was still a priority. It was during this time that community rehabilitation (Community-Based Rehabilitation Program or CBRP) led by ADACs was highlighted as the new principal feature of the government's campaign against illegal drugs. The DILG emphasized that ADACs are composed of officials from LGUs, public schools, faith-based groups, and civil society organizations. In October 2018, Sangguniang Kabataan (elected barangay youth council) leaders in Caloocan participated in a training during which speakers from PNP and DILG emphasized the role of BADACs in the antidrug campaign.

We can either interpret this as the government's belated recognition that a comprehensive CBRP led by ADACs should have been the focus from the start in addressing the drug problem instead of the controversial PNP-led tokhang operations; on the other hand, it can also mean that a more sinister type of tokhang is being readied, with civilian authorities supposedly taking the lead in the antidrug campaign. If the first is true, it means the Duterte government engaged in a brutal social experiment that cost the lives of thousands and could have been avoided if it first tried alternative programs requiring the total but peaceful mobilization of the LGU machinery. But if the second is the real intent, it could mean more violence, with ADACs supervising the expanded implementation of antidrug programs while the police are left to focus on tokhang-style special operations. During the workshop organized by DILG last July 2018, an official talked about family-based accreditation and the increased participation of other institutions in the community to level up the antidrug drive.

Soon, the BADAC became a venue to implement DILG directives even if the matter is not directly related to tokhang. In particular, the BADAC was infused with programs that are supposedly in aid of the fight against illegal drugs but are actually components of the counterinsurgency campaign. This was confirmed during a BADAC meeting held in Camarin in January 2019 to elect cluster leaders and clarify their roles during barangay drug clearing operations. The meeting was attended by barangay staff and leaders of various local associations. A cluster is composed of twenty to thirty families per area. During the meeting, a police senior inspector informed the participants that cluster heads are required to fill out BADAC forms identifying the number of families in the area, their occupation, activities, and membership in an organization. The police mentioned that this is meant to identify drug users and dealers, but he added that this is also intended to monitor the presence of New People's Army members and communists in the community. Activists who organized the Know Your Rights campaign expressed concern that those who publicly opposed tokhang could be the target of the BADAC reporting mechanism.

TOKHANG AS “SOCIAL DISARTICULATION”⁸

After more than a year of saturating North Caloocan with tokhang raids characterized by almost weekly spectacles of dead bodies and arbitrary arrests, the trauma created by this violent phase of the government's campaign against illegal drugs is reflected in the formation of an impression among residents that the killings victimized hundreds, if not thousands of their friends, families, and neighbors. After seeing empirical data about the extent of killings in the district, all the respondents of the research said they believe that the number is low, the killings number more than what the media has reported, and the violence of tokhang was an unprecedented phenomenon that affected all.

Tokhang's bloody legacy continues to stigmatize drug users while raising a certain level of paranoia and hysteria among residents. Every time there is a gun attack or a crime is committed against someone in the community, the initial reaction of many is to attribute it to a tokhang-related operation. Whether accurate or not, it raises the

8. The concept was adopted by the Caloocan LGU from Cernea (1997).

specter of tokhang in the eyes of residents while conditioning their attitudes and behavior on how to avoid being implicated in the government's "war on drugs." In other words, residents have become more cautious in their actions to survive the rampaging police-led tokhang operatives. Reloaded or not, tokhang under the Duterte regime has remained an insidious form of social control.

When relocating informal settler families, local governments assess the readiness of communities and one of the indicators they use is called "social disarticulation," which they define as the "disruption of existing social fabric." Michael Cernea offers a more devastating elaboration of what social disarticulation entails:

Forced displacement tears apart the existing social fabric: it disperses and fragments communities, dismantles patterns of social organization and interpersonal ties; kinship groups become scattered as well. Life-sustaining informal networks of reciprocal help, local voluntary associations, and self-organized mutual service arrangements are dismantled. The destabilization of community life is apt to generate a typical state of anomie, crisis-laden insecurity, and loss of sense of cultural identity . . . (Cernea 1997, 1575)

The impact of tokhang could be similar to the demolition of communities but its methods are more brutal and sinister while shrouded in extralegal secrecy and affects a wider segment of the local population. It intensifies state intrusion into the lives of the poor, overkill police deployment is legitimized, and the community's state of underdevelopment is entirely blamed on the drug problem. It also undermines solidarity among neighbors by instigating citizen surveillance, which makes it more difficult to promote unity in challenging the reign of oppressive local authorities. Community solidarity is shattered by tokhang, where everybody is seen as a suspect or snitch in a supposedly drug-affected barangay.

The ferocity of tokhang is made more evident in a community which was originally designated as a relocation area for informal settlers but whose residents have been targeted once more by a government program that resembles demolition operations.

Tokhang's controversial features such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and expanded presence of the police are evident in North Caloocan. Support from LGU officials is also visible and this is sustained by well-funded programs that advocate the fulfillment of tokhang objectives. Tokhang's many uses for politicians in power,

especially those who are eager to protect their future mandate, are reflected in the case of North Caloocan.

The “shock and awe” slaying of barangay leaders in Phase 12 mirrored the brutal methods of tokhang at the national level. Yet, illegal drug transactions are still rampant in the barangay like in other parts of the country. It points to the failure of the tokhang approach and also the senselessness of continuing a discredited program that merely unleashed a tremendous wave of violence and suffering.

To probe what tokhang did to urban poor communities can be a depressing endeavor, but again, the story of North Caloocan also offers some hope: that in spite of the ruthlessness and tokhang-related terror inflicted on the local population, there were citizens who learned to resist inspiring courage in others. That there is another way to deal with tokhang other than to stay silent or survive its brutality. That it is possible to fight back. ❀

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