

# Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's *Halkçılık* and *Devletçilik*: A Comparison with Sun Yat-sen's Political Thought



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## ABSTRACT

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-sen are both great men who overturned the old system to open a new era and have ideas and guidelines for governing countries. Among the six principles of Kemalism, Halkçılık and Devletçilik have similar contents to Sun Yat-sen's The Principle of Democracy and The Principle of Livelihood. Kemal Atatürk does not literally mention "civil rights" and "people's livelihood" in six principles, but in Halkçılık asserts "people's rule" rather than autocracy, advocates that power comes from the people, and that the responsibility of the government is to seek welfare for the people. Kemal Atatürk's Devletçilik focuses on the state-led planned economy and protecting the private property of farmers, like in Sun Yat-sen's Thought of Livelihood. This paper consists of three parts. The first part compares Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-sen's main contributions and key thoughts, the second part Halkçılık and Devletçilik of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-sen's corresponding thought, and the third part the historical background and objective conditions of their ideas.

**Keywords:** Comparison, devletçilik, halkçılık, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Sun Yat-sen

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## Introduction

MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK IS A WELL-KNOWN historical figure in Turkey, just as Sun Yat-sen is in China. The similarities between the two figures are clear. First, they were both Republic Founders, the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the Republic of China in 1912. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is known as the "father of the Turks", his surname, Atatürk, was given to him by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Sun Yat-sen is known as "the father of the Nations" in the Republic of China since he was its first provisional president.

Second, they both contributed to eradicating the "Empire system" and overthrew the old order (the Ottoman Empire and the Qing Dynasty).

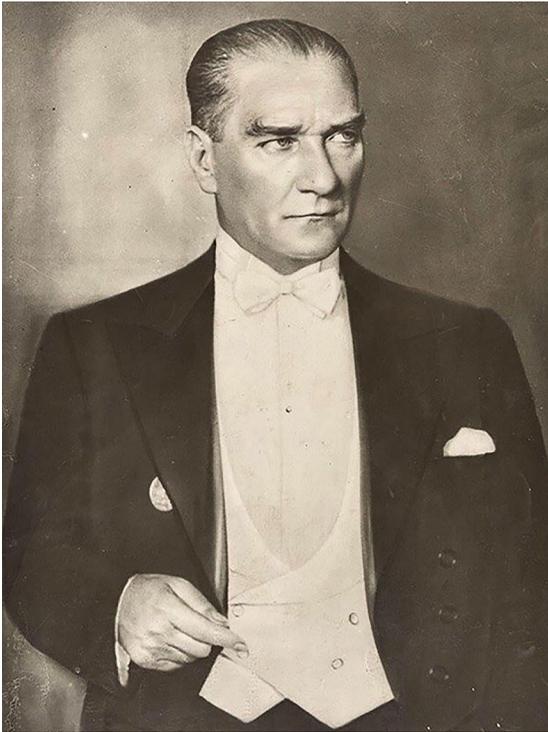
Third, they had ideas and outlines of how to

rule the state. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had the "The Principles of Kemalism" (Tongas, 1939), and Sun's political philosophy is known as the "Three Principles of the People": that is, The Principle of Nationalism, The Principle of Democracy, and The Principle of Livelihood.

Fourth, both suffered troubles with their health from great causes. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk lived to 57 years old (1881-1938), and Sun Yat-sen lived to 59 years old (1866-1925).

Fifth, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-sen are figures of charisma for respectively producing moral power among the people of their countries.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-sen are great men with far-reaching influence, meaning research on them has been very abundant. In terms of materials, Atatürk's articles and works,



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Atatürk website, 2021)



Sun Yat-sen (China Daily, 2019)

personal notes, speeches, letters, conversation records, and public government archives are very rich as “original materials”. There are countless biographies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The existing research involves Atatürk’s policy, thought, diplomacy, contributions, and all aspects of his daily life. In Chinese books, like the “History of the Middle East” (Zhi, 2010), more emphasis is placed on the achievements of Atatürk’s revolution and modernization reform.

Sun Yat-sen left many first-hand materials, such as letters, speeches, conversations, writings, and telegrams. There are also many kinds of biographies and papers on Sun Yat-sen too. Only Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-sen’s political thoughts are taken as an example in this paper, especially regarding their similarities and differences.

### **Main Contributions and Key Thought**

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established the Republic of Turkey and carried out successful reforms (Kinross, 2002). In detail, his historical contributions can be summarized as follows:

1) He successfully led the national liberation movement, won national independence, and safeguarded Turkey’s national dignity and sovereignty.

2) The Republic of Turkey was founded, the sultanate and the Caliphate system were abolished, and the constitution of the Republic of Turkey was promulgated, which laid the foundation for democracy and modernization.

3) He developed the national economy and promoted economic modernization with nationalist policy.

4) He reformed education and the Turkish alp-

habet, which improved the nation's culture and trained a large number of professional workers and artists.

5) Through the reform of social customs, superstition was eliminated, science was promoted, polygamy was prohibited, women were given the right to vote, and the secularization of social life was realized.

### **Sun Yat-sen's thought and governing program, "Three Principles of the People", was put forward by Sun himself and included different contents.**

In a word, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk played a central role in the creation of modern Turkey.

Sun Yat-sen was a pioneer of China's democratic revolution. He first held the banner of anti-Qing and anti-feudalism movements, launched multiple armed uprisings, organized revolutionary political parties, and led the revolution of 1911; he founded the Republic of China, overthrew feudal autocracy, and promulgated the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China, which rooted the concept of Republic deeply in the hearts of the people. However, Sun Yat-sen had not finished his cause when he died.

Atatürk's thought and governing program, the famous "The Principles of Kemalism", was gradually formed in practice from 1919 to 1931. After 1931, "six arrows" were used to represent the "six principles" of the party platform of the Republican people's party. These became "the Principles of Kemalism", also known as "Atatürkçülük" in Turkish or "Atatürkism" in English.

The "six principles" are summarized as follows:

1) Republicanism, Cumhuriyetçilik in Turkish, represents the republican system instead of monarchy, reflecting the principle of "the rule of the people" rather than individual dictatorship.

2) Nationalism, Milliyetçilik in Turkish, means Turkey's territorial integrity, Turkey's national independence, and its position in the international community.

3) Populism<sup>1</sup>, Halkçılık in Turkish, refers to state power belonging to the people (power comes from the people), everyone equal before the law, the government as the government of the people that seeks welfare for all, objection to privileges, opposition to the division of Turkish society into different classes.

4) Reformism, İnkılapçılık in Turkish, also translated as "Revolutionism", means a constant re-evaluation of the status quo to actively forge ahead and unremittingly carry out social and economic reform.

5) Laicism, Lâiklik in Turkish, includes political and religious separation, opposing the interference of religious forces in state power (remove the interference and restraint of religion in politics), the secularization of law, education, and social life, and abolishing religious privileges.

6) Statism, Devletçilik in Turkish, addresses state intervention in the economy, the encouragement of private businesses, development of the national economy independently, with "Monopoly" in some areas. The goal is to realize independence, freedom, and equality in Turkey and the civilization and progress of Turkish society (Xian, 2001).

Sun Yat-sen's thought and governing program, "Three Principles of the People", was put forward by Sun himself and included different contents.

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note (Ed.N.): "Populism" in Turkey is different from that of other countries. In general, this word includes pejorative meanings, however, in Turkey it has positive meaning which refers to prioritizing of public interest.



Ataturk in Ankara (Atatürk website, 2021)

1) The Principle of Nationalism is to oppose the rule of Manchu, the Qing Dynasties, and the aggression of foreign powers, overthrow warlords, seek the equality of all ethnic groups in China, and recognize the right of national self-determination.

2) The Principle of Democracy refers to the implementation of democratic politics shared by ordinary civilians. The government has the power of legislation, judicature, administration, examination, and supervision so that the people have the power of election, recall, creation, and referendum. It emphasizes the distinction between direct civil rights and power, that is, that the government has governance and the people have political power.

3) The most important part, The Principle of livelihood, includes: first, average land ownership and, second, the control of capital, meaning private individuals cannot manipulate the people's livelihood (Xian, 1948).

Sun Yat-sen envisioned that through implementing the Three Principles of People, “people make the best of their talents, places, things and goods” (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Modern History ed.,1981a). All aiming towards making the country rich, the people strong, and the whole world as one community. Sun Yat-sen once explained that every country must follow its own methods when dealing with livelihood problems, not necessarily imitating the West because Western countries have not solved their own problems and the Kuomintang can solve the livelihood problem of the Chinese people through equal land ownership and capital control (Wells, 2001).

Atatürk's and Sun Yat-sen's thoughts have the same goals that reflect national desires to become rich and strong from poverty and the urgent requirement to integrate into the mainstream civilization of the world.

### A Comparison of *Halkçılık* and *Devletçilik*

Referring to Sun Yat-sen's "Three Principles of People", we see that only "Nationalism" among the six principles of Kemalism is the same as Sun Yat-sen's "Nationalism". However, their respective definitions and applications of "Nationalism" varies greatly. Despite this, *Halkçılık* and *Devletçilik* have similar contents to Sun Yat Sen's The Principle of Democracy and The Principle of Livelihood, which this paper focuses on comparing.

#### Among the six principles of Kemalism, there are similar contents to Sun Yat-sen's "civil rights" and "people's livelihood".

Sun Yat-sen's nationalist thought has gone through an evolution process. At first, it was "platoon Manchu", which proposed "expelling Tartar prisoners and restoring China" by focusing on an anti-Manchu rule. Later, he abandoned the simple "Han chauvinism" and emphasized the "five ethnic republics". In a speech in 1924, there was a new interpretation of nationalism, which included opposing the aggression of foreign powers and recognizing the right of national self-determination. Sun Yat-sen's nationalism is relative to cosmopolitanism. In Sun Yat-sen's view, the way to restore the national spirit is to catch up, make yourself strong, and maintain due independence. When you become strong, you should "help the weak and help the lean, do our national duty, and use the inherent moral peace as the foundation to unify the world and become a rule of great harmony" (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Modern History ed., 1981b).

"Nationalism" in Kemalism is the most complex of the six principles; it cannot be explained in a few words. After the disintegration of the multi-ethnic empire, the Turks could only establish their own Republic. Its territory was dominated by Anatolia and Eastern Thrace, meaning the residents were limited to Turkish speakers and a few Armenians and Kurds. In fact, the Republic of Turkey had undergone "national reconstruction" before it became the Turkish nation that nationalism defined in the constitution. In his speeches in March 1922 and March 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk focused on his national view, defining the relationship between "Turkish national tradition" and "Islam", and put forward the goal of rebuilding the "Turkish Identity". Mustafa Kemal Atatürk separated the "Turkish nation and its history" from those complex thoughts and ideas (Tao, 2011). To reconstruct national identity, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the historians who supported him created a "Turkish view of history" by studying Turkey's early history, compiling history textbooks, and holding a history conference.

Among the six principles of Kemalism, there are similar contents to Sun Yat-sen's "civil rights" and "people's livelihood". Regarding civil rights and people's livelihood, Sun emphasized eradicating the idea of imperial power and returning the government to the people. He also emphasized solving the basic survival problems of the people and put forward that "the first priority of construction lies in people's livelihood". In the "six principles" of Kemalism, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did not literally mention "civil rights" and "people's livelihood" in six principles but asserted "people's rule" rather than autocracy in "Republicanism". He also advocated in "Populism" that power comes from the people and that it is the



Atatürk in Dolmabahçe Palace (Atatürk website, 2021)

responsibility of the government to seek welfare for all, which is consistent with Sun Yat-sen's principle of "civil rights".

Sun Yat-sen's thoughts on "civil rights" are very precious. The Five Power Constitution proposed by Sun refers to the separation of legislative, administrative, and judicial powers in Western countries, drawing lessons from the examination and supervision system in China's ancient political system. He created two powers of examination and supervision, which is unique in the history of world political thought. Sun Yat-sen's understanding of "civil rights" is that "Managing people's affairs is politics. Having the power to manage people's affairs is political power. Today, managing political affairs with the people is called civil rights" (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Modern History ed., 1981c). Sun Yat-sen's view of history is as follows: people compete for power with the monarch, resulting in revolution; in the era of civil rights, good people fought

with evil people, justice fought with power, and civil rights gradually developed. Civil rights advocate equality in political status. It is necessary to break the monarchy and make everyone equal. Therefore, civil rights correspond to equality (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Modern History ed., 1981d). This truth is concise, easy to understand, and thorough.

In Atatürk's reform, the reform of the legal system was put at the core, and legal means were used to protect civil rights, the safety of people's lives and property, and people's right to education and development. The State encourages the private economy and protects the private property of farmers. The Izmir economic conference in 1923 discussed this national economic development by formulating national economic policy, encouraging the development of private enterprises in Turkey, implementing the protective tariff policy, and establishing the national bank. From 1927 to 1929, the land law was passed to distribute land

to landless farmers. The government encouraged industrial mechanization and established credit and sales cooperatives (Berberoglu, 1982). After 1929, Turkey adopted the Soviet model and implemented the policy of state intervention in the economy. Obviously, the issues of “civil rights” and “people’s livelihood” in Atatürk’s principles summarize the experience of the Turkish government in the process of institutional reform and national construction.

### **Mustafa Kemal’s Halkçılık and Devletçilik have been put into practice and achieved results.**

In contrast, while Sun Yat-sen’s thoughts on “civil rights” and “people’s livelihood” are reasonable, they are just his personal ideas. After the northern expedition, the Kuomintang gained national power and respected Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of People” in theory rather than in practice. In fact, it neither promoted civil rights nor solved the problem of people’s livelihood.

In short, Kemalism is a summary of practical political practice, which is to the point and easy to operate. Mustafa Kemal’s Halkçılık and Devletçilik have been put into practice and achieved results. Although Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of People” are systematic, comprehensive, thoughtful, and farsighted, Sun Yat-sen’s thoughts on “civil rights” and “people’s livelihood” were never put into practice.

### **Comparison Based on Their Historical Backgrounds**

To compare the similarities and differences between Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Sun Yat-

sen’s political thoughts, we should analyze their historical background and basic conditions.

First, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters completed the multiple tasks of dynastic, institutional, and social change. The most critical reforms were at the political level. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk realized one “replacement” and two “separations”. The “replacement” was the well-known “replacing the sultanate with the republican system”. The first “separation” was the rapid realization of “separation of politics and religion”, the breakdown of intervention by religious forces in the political field to realize secularization. The second “separation” was the gradual realization of the “separation of military and government”. When founding the Republic of Turkey, most of the political elites were soldiers. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and İsmet Bey set an example, took off their military uniforms and engaged in full-time political work or foreign affairs. It also stipulates that the officers in parliament must withdraw from military posts and realize the civilian leadership of the military.

Next, we should highlight more differences between these two important historical figures.

Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary activities were early, but until his death in 1925, “the revolution was not successful”. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led the war of national independence and achieved success in more than three years. Sun Yat-sen was inspired by Atatürk’s success and Turkey’s victory. Sun Yat-sen’s article praised the 1908 Turkish Revolution to inspire Chinese revolutionary martyrs. Atatürk’s starting point is very different from Sun Yat-sen. When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led the national independence movement, he was already a senior military general and a member of the Ottoman Parliament (constitutional monarchy from 1908 to 1918).

Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary activities relied on his ambition and talent, which experienced many failures.

**Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was a great politician and strategist, and his personal quality, talent, and perseverance are undeniably superior.**

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was a great politician and strategist, and his personal quality, talent, and perseverance are undeniably superior. However, there are some objective conditions for his success: first, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, so Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's mission was to save the Turkish nation. Second, the humiliation of the Ottoman Sultan government made the "light" of the Sultan and the Caliph no longer as dazzling as before, and the difficulty and resistance of abolishing the two systems were greatly reduced. Third, the westernization reform practice of the late Ottoman Empire made the concept of Western civilization go deep into the minds of intellectuals. In particular, the second constitutional government (1908-1918) directly reserved and trained several leading cadres for the Republic of Turkey, including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself.

In contrast, Sun Yat-sen was not as lucky as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Sun Yat-sen's task was too ambitious: to establish a republic on a vast territory and change the fate of more than 400 million people of dozens of ethnic groups such as Han, Mongolian, Hui, etc. Moreover, Sun Yat-sen was not a soldier and had no army at first (Huangpu Military Academy was established only in 1924). He was not in the government and

had no social status. In the face of a fragmented society and a huge illiterate group, Sun Yat-sen's revolution was much more difficult. Sun Yat-sen did not have political resources (power, social status, etc.) and just relied on one belief and constant persuasion. Therefore, Sun Yat-sen is not comparable to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on this point.

Third, when commenting on these two historical figures, we should take an attitude of transcending utilitarianism. Sun Yat-sen and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk are both magnanimous leaders who did not care about fame and wealth, personal gains, or losses. According to the standard of Chinese historian Qian Mu's evaluation of historical figures, Sun Yat-sen and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk were born at the end of the world as "figures with performance". Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was a successful figure, and Sun Yat-sen was an unsuccessful figure, but his influence was still great.

Atatürk's political practice was unique and has a prominent position in world history. Sun Yat-sen was erudite and knowledgeable, had great feelings, was generous, and understood the nature of civilians. He dared to be the first and was resolute, optimistic, visionary, and calm in the case of setbacks and change. His spirit and personality are admirable. Sun Yat-sen's pursuit to strive and build a new China with "the most enlightened politics and the most comfortable people" is so lofty and beautiful a goal that it is worth fighting for (Sun, 2011).

## Conclusion

Contemporary Turks can openly talk about Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, question the "Atatürk era", and even criticize his doctrine as Turkey's

progress. His reform was successful, because he carried out sweeping institutional changes and transformed other aspects of society. The goal of Atatürk's reform was to move towards a modern civilized society. The reform of educational concepts and methods gave birth to a huge knowledgeable group in Turkish society, brought up citizens with independent personalities, and made them the cornerstone of modern civilized society in Turkey. Sun Yat-sen's goals and aspirations were similar, but they were never truly realized. We should understand the historical background and the special situation faced by Sun Yat-sen at that time when evaluating his success and look to his influence and ideas instead.

Decades later, the Chinese revolution led by Mao Zedong won a victory and established an independent People's Republic in China. The Chinese Communists believe in Marxism, absorb the tradition of Chinese civilization, and recognize that the Three Principles of People are the political basis of the Anti-Japanese national united front. Sun Yat Sen's thought had an important influence on Mao Zedong's new democratic theory. The success of Mao Zedong's revolutionary practice made Sun Yat Sen's last wish to establish a nation-state and strive for freedom and democracy come true in China, while Atatürk's legacy was abandoned due to Turkey's integration into the Atlantic System and the fact that Atatürk's legacy was wrongfully interpreted as Westernization. Although Turkey and China are both Asian countries, their development paths are different.

On the comparison between Sun Yat Sen and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, academic papers and works have been published. For example, the article "The Evolution of Turkish Nationalism: An Unconventional Approach Based on a Comparative and International Perspective" by Efe Can Gürcan, focuses

on the similarities and differences between Sun Yat Sen's nationalism and Atatürk's nationalism (Gürcan, 2010). For us, the thoughts of these two great figures need further reading and thinking on the basis of this paper. 🌸

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