

“THE PRINCIPLE OF DEMOCRACY” (1924)
By Sun Yat-sen

Introduction

The Republic of China was in a shambles in 1924. The national government in Beijing was a virtually powerless prize over which warlords fought; it had no real authority over the country, which was administered (more or less) in a patchwork fashion by hundreds of independent warlords. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), the intellectual “father” of the Republic of China, was in Guangzhou, working, with Soviet assistance, to turn his Guomindang or Nationalist Party into a tightly organized Leninist political party in command of an army strong enough to defeat the warlords and reunite China.

As a part of the rebuilding of the Guomindang, Sun Yat-sen gave a series of lectures on the Three People’s Principles. The Three People’s Principles (Democracy, Nationalism, and People’s Livelihood) were the ill-defined “ideology” of the Nationalist revolution. Sun had begun articulating these three principles as a revolutionary conspirator prior to the 1911 Revolution. Now, as the leader of a political party, Sun wanted to sharpen the definitions of the Three People’s Principles and fit them to the needs of the mid-1920s.

The excerpt below is from Sun’s lecture on “the principle of democracy.”

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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After China has established a powerful government, we must not be afraid, as Western people are, that the government will become too strong and that we will be unable to control it. For it is our plan that the political power of the reconstructed state be divided into two parts. One is the power over the government; that great power will be placed entirely in the hands of the people, who will have a full degree of sovereignty and will be able to control directly the affairs of state — this political power is popular sovereignty. The other power is the governing power; that great power will be placed in the hands of the government organs, which will be powerful and will manage all the nation’s business — this governing power is the power of the government. ...

...

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on

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What are the newest discoveries in the way of exercising popular sovereignty? First, there is suffrage, and it is the only method practiced in the so-called democracies. ...

The second of the newly discovered methods is the right of recall. ...

...

... If the people think that a certain law would be of great advantage to them, they should have the power to decide upon this law and turn it over to the government for execution. This third kind of popular power is called initiative.

If the people think that an old law is not beneficial to them, they should have the power to amend it and to ask the government to enforce the amended law and do away with the old law. This is called the referendum and is a fourth form of popular sovereignty.

Questions:

1. Looking at it from Sun Yat-sen’s point of view in 1924, why should he want a powerful government? Why does he contrast his desire with a Western fear of powerful government?
2. Sun lays out four ways in which popular sovereignty will be exercised. Are there ways in which popular sovereignty could be exercised that Sun fails to mention? If so, why might he not mention them?
3. Considering the models of government available at the time (1924), which other models around the world does Sun’s vision most closely resemble? Why?

Longer Selection

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Separation of Sovereignty and Ability

How can a government be made all-powerful? Once the government is all-powerful, how can it be made responsive to the will of the people? ... I have found a method to solve the problem. The method that I have thought of is a new discovery in political theory and is a fundamental solution of the whole problem. ... It is the theory of the distinction between sovereignty and ability.

After China has established a powerful government, we must not be afraid, as Western people are, that the government will become too strong and that we will be unable to control it.

For it is our plan that the political power of the reconstructed state will be divided into two parts. One is the power over the government; that great power will be placed entirely in the hands of the people, who will have a full degree of sovereignty and will be able to control directly the affairs of state — this political power is popular sovereignty. The other power is the governing power; that great power will be placed in the hands of the government organs, which will be powerful and will manage all the nation’s business — this governing power is the power of the government. If the people have a full measure of political sovereignty and the methods for exercising popular control over the government are well worked out, we need not fear that the government will become too strong and uncontrollable. ...

Let the people in thinking about government distinguish between sovereignty and ability. Let the great political force of the state be divided into two: the power of the government and the power of the people. Such a division will make the government the machinery and the people the engineer. The attitude of the people toward the government will then resemble the attitude of the engineer toward his machine. The construction of machinery has made such advances nowadays that not only men with mechanical knowledge but even children without any knowledge of machinery are able to control it.

The Four Powers of the People

What are the newest discoveries in the way of exercising popular sovereignty? First, there is suffrage, and it is the only method practiced throughout the so-called advanced democracies. Is this one form of popular sovereignty enough in government? This one power by itself may be compared to the earlier machines, which could move forward only but not back.

The second of the newly discovered methods is the right of recall. When the people have this right, they possess the power of pulling the machine back.

These two rights give the people control over officials and enable them to put all government officials in their positions or to remove them from their positions. The coming and going of officials follows the free will of the people, just as the modern machines move to and fro by the free action of the engine. Besides officials, another important thing in a state is law; “with men to govern there must also be laws for governing.”¹ What powers must the people possess in order to control the laws? If the people think that a certain law would be of great advantage to them, they should have the power to decide upon this law and turn it over to the government for execution. This third kind of popular power is called the initiative.

If the people think that an old law is not beneficial to them, they should have the power to amend it and to ask the government to enforce the amended law and do away with the old law. This is called the referendum and is a fourth form of popular sovereignty.

¹ Probably a reference to Huang Zongxi, whose writings on rulership and law Sun had reprinted and widely distributed.

Only when the people have these four rights can we say that democracy is complete, and only when these four powers are effectively applied can we say that there is a thoroughgoing, direct, and popular sovereignty.

The Five-Power Constitution

With the people exercising the four great powers to control the government, what methods will the government use in performing its work? In order that the government may have a complete organ through which to do its best work, there must be a five-power constitution. A government is not complete and cannot do its best work for the people unless it is based on the five-power constitution [i.e., a government composed of five branches: executive, legislative, judicial, civil service examination, and censorate]. ...

All governmental powers were formerly monopolized by kings and emperors, but after the revolutions they were divided into three groups. Thus the United States, after securing its independence, established a government with three coordinate departments. The American system achieved such good results that it was adopted by other nations. But foreign governments have merely a triple-power separation. Why do we now want a separation of five powers? What is the source of the two new features in our five-power constitution?

The two new features come from old China. China long ago had the independent systems of civil service examination and censorate, and they were very effective. The imperial censors of the Manchu dynasty and the official advisers of the Tang dynasty made a fine censoring system. The power of censorship includes the power to impeach. Foreign countries also have this power, only it is placed in the legislative body and is not a separate governmental power.

The selection of real talent and ability through examinations has been characteristic of China for thousands of years. Foreign scholars who have recently studied Chinese institutions highly praise China's old independent examination system. There have been imitations of the system for the selection of able men in the West. Great Britain's civil service examinations are modeled after the old Chinese system, but they are limited to ordinary officials. The British system does not yet possess the spirit of the independent examination of China. In old China, [however], ... the powers of civil service examination and the censorate were independent of the Throne. ...

Hence, as for the separation of governmental powers, we can say that China had three coordinate departments of government just as the modern democracies. China practiced the separation of autocratic, examination, and censorate powers for thousands of years. Western countries have practiced the separation of legislative, judicial, and executive powers for only a little over a century. However, if we now want to combine the best from China and the best from other countries and guard against all kinds of abuse, we must take the three Western governmental powers — the executive, legislative, and judicial — add to them the Chinese powers of examination and censorate and make a perfect government of five powers. Such a

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government will be the most complete and the finest in the world, and a state with such a government will indeed be of the people, by the people, and for the people.