

# Internet campaigning arrives cautiously in Japan

August 27 2009, By YURI KAGEYAMA , Associated Press Writer

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In this animated image on the official Web page of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, a noodle chef, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Democratic Party leader Yukio Hatoyama, widely expected to be the next prime minister, replacing ruling party chief Taro Aso after the balloting on Aug. 30, 2009 for the lower house of parliament, presents a bowl of noodle, trying to please every customer until his bowl is an overflowing concoction of fish, fruit and ice cream. The ad, which has drawn more than 208,000 hits on YouTube, is poking fun at the alleged indecisiveness of Hatoyama and his party, the Democratic Party of Japan. (AP Photo/The official Web page of the Liberal Democratic Party)

(AP) -- Japan is one of the world's most Internet-savvy nations - except when it comes to politics. Decades-old rules have effectively banned campaigning on the Web.

But this Sunday's general election is testing that restriction with some candidates blogging, tweeting and posting speeches on YouTube.

A 1950 law, aimed at keeping costs down and leveling the competition among candidates, limits a host of campaign activities, including TV time and the number and size of leaflets permitted. It doesn't mention the Internet, but the official interpretation is that the Web is off-limits.

In the run-up to one of the most hotly contested votes in years, however, many candidates are regularly updating their home pages and blogs to woo voters. To skirt the regulations, the parties and candidates avoid direct references to voting and address more general issues such as policies or events they are attending.

Many have become deft at trumpeting their cause or criticizing their opponents implicitly - highlighting the emergence of negative campaigning, rare in Japan until now.

In a cartoon on the official Web page of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, a noodle chef tries to please every customer until his bowl is an overflowing concoction of fish, fruit and ice cream.

The cook bears an uncanny resemblance to opposition leader Yukio Hatoyama and is meant to poke fun at the alleged indecisiveness of his party, the Democratic Party of Japan, which polls indicate is likely to win control of the powerful lower house of parliament, the chamber that picks the prime minister.

"No one finds happiness by accommodating," a male voice says at the end of the video, which has drawn more than 200,000 hits on YouTube.

Government official Masanobu Hara said the boundaries on what is allowed under the law for campaigning are very complex, and the

Internet so far is not included.

"Internet use is now not permitted," he said in a recent interview. "That is the interpretation."

He declined to comment on individual cases in which parties and candidates appear to be increasingly skirting the law.

Experts say legal change is needed for Japan to fully catch up with other industrialized nations in Net campaign use.

Ken Takeuchi, president of [Japan](#) Internet News Co., which runs a Web page with information about the election, says candidates are testing the waters on Net use.

He argues that Internet campaigning is one of the most democratic and cost-effective ways to campaign.

"Everyone knows the rules are ridiculous," he said, adding that authorities are unlikely to do more than warn an exceptionally wayward candidate. "Key information about candidates isn't reaching voters the way it should."

Old-style candidates, who tend to get elected by a network of community lobbies, still rely mostly on riding around neighborhoods in trucks, begging for votes through blaring loudspeakers but doing little to communicate their policy views.

Masatoshi Onozuka, 37, a Democratic candidate in Saitama prefecture, north of Tokyo, is also using cyberspace to communicate his message, uploading stumping scenes of his pedaling around on a banner-decked bicycle.

"I am all for using the [Internet](#) in elections," he says, smiling on his Web page. "It's a way for people to gain more information, not just from the established media, to make decisions. It lies at the root of a democracy."

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On the Net:

Liberal Democratic Party on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/LDPchannel>

Masatoshi Onozuka on YouTube:

<http://onozuka.jp/category/1330382.html>

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