For Politicians in Japan, Net Is No-Go Zone

An informal ban that dates from 1950 strictly regulates campaigning. Discreet fliers are acceptable; candidate websites are not.

By Bruce Wallace, Times Staff Writer

TOKYO — Were it not for the Internet, Takafumi Horie might not have become the richest, brashest Japanese entrepreneur of his generation.

And were he not so rich and brash, he might never have caught the eye of Junichiro Koizumi, Japan's prime minister, and become the celebrity candidate for parliament he is today, running as an ally of Koizumi in the election Sunday.

But the T-shirt-wearing, spiky haired founder of Livedoor, a Japanese Web portal and massive e-commerce site, can't use the Internet or any other digital technology to make his case.

No home pages. No blogs. No spam mailings and certainly no fund-raising. None are allowed in one of the most technology-obsessed nations on Earth.

For Horie, a 32-year-old rebel in a country distinctly lacking in antiheroes, those edicts are like telling George Bush he can't campaign with Karl Rove.

"I need to get to the people in the area and I keep thinking: If only I had the freedom to use phone mail, photo mail, viral marketing and ring tones to get my message across," Horie lamented this week before an audience in Tokyo.

"But most Diet members don't know how to use the Internet," he said, citing lawmakers' discomfort with technology as more evidence that Japan's political class is out of touch.

Using the Internet for political ends is not, strictly speaking, outlawed. It simply falls outside the category of admissible campaigning.

The ban on digital politics has its roots in the Public Office Election Law passed in 1950, which anticipated the age of spam by outlawing the "distribution of documents and graphics to unspecified general public."

So door-to-door campaigning is illegal, as are billboards and neon signs. Fliers can be distributed at campaign events only if folded, and to the general public only if inserted into newspapers.

Lanterns with a candidate's name are fine, as long as the name is not a millimeter over 85 centimeters by 45 centimeters. Supporters can wear sashes promoting their politician of choice.

Not mentioned among the political prohibitions are Japan's least genteel electoral vehicles: trucks and vans that cruise through residential neighborhoods blaring appeals for the candidate through mounted loudspeakers.

The provisions now appear quaint in a country where people seem to be in constant communication over digital networks. Whether on the subway or on the sidewalk, Japanese crowds appear to collectively move with their eyes locked onto their cellphones, thumbing keypads to send e-mail or surf the Net for everything from news to train times.

"The law was made under the assumption that posters are basically the method for campaigning," wrote Tsuyoshi Kimura, a former Bank of Japan executive who now posts a weekly Web log. Throughout the campaign, Kimura has used his blog — possibly in violation of the electoral laws — to deride the absurdity of banning Internet politicking in a country that prides itself on its advanced information technology.

"For the campaign, even home pages are not accepted, let alone blogs," he wrote online on Aug. 31, the last day before official campaigning began. "They say Japan is an IT superpower? It's a comedy."
Few seem prepared to defy the exclusion, however. Koizumi's Liberal Democratic Party formally protested that the opposition Democratic Party of Japan updated its home page after the campaign had started.

The DPJ dutifully removed the text of its leader's campaign kickoff speech.

There have been calls from government panels to lift the ban. But none of the revisions to the election law in recent years — including three amendments this year — has addressed the role of the Internet.

Critics say the oversight is intentional. Japanese politics is a tightly controlled affair in which party grandees handpick and bankroll candidates.

The Internet, often touted as a powerful democratizing force, threatens that political monopoly. Politicians as diverse as 2004 U.S. presidential candidate Howard Dean and Chinese President Hu Jintao have discovered firsthand that the Internet can be a parallel power base, where activists can organize, raise money and communicate with vast numbers of voters or other activists.

But Japan's political cyberspace remains small and thinly populated. Unlike other countries, the Japanese public has shown little appetite for using the Internet as a political forum or tool.

JanJan, a Japanese website that attempts to emulate a popular South Korean Internet newspaper filled with stories and opinion posted by "citizen reporters," has had limited success attracting readers and reporters since going online in 2003.

"Compared with Koreans, Japanese are hesitant to voice their own opinions," wrote Ken Takeuchi, JanJan's editor, in an online essay that tried to explain why Japanese cyberspace remained comparatively apolitical.

"Generally, Japanese tend to avoid arguments, to not express their own opinions, to follow the majority. We are not good at discussions."

Yet this election, with its mantra of "reform," is producing whispers of change. Businessman Yoshito Hori and a group of fellow young entrepreneurs recently created a website called the YES Project aimed at encouraging people younger than 40 to push the "old guard" running Japan into retirement.

"Japanese politics has made little progress because of the resistance force centered by an old guard who had a cozy relationship with their support base," the YES home page declares.

"We will stand up, make remarks more aggressively, go to vote, and support those who promote reforms," the site promises. "Then we can change the society."

On the campaign trail, candidate Horie also sees reminders that the Internet has proved impossible to completely shackle and control.

"Even when I'm shaking hands, other people are taking my picture with their cellphones and sending them to their friends," Horie said.

"So I think — indirectly — we are already using the Internet," he said, smiling.

Naoko Nishiwaki of The Times' Tokyo Bureau contributed to this report.