SKorean presidential hopeful vows freer Internet

YOUKYUNG LEE - AP Technology Writer - Associated Press

A South Korean presidential candidate has promised to get rid of encryption technology that has tied South Korean Internet users to a single web browser —Microsoft's Internet Explorer —for online financial transactions.

Ahn Cheol-soo, a popular independent presidential candidate, said companies will be free to choose what online security technology they use if he wins the December election.

Since South Korea established an Internet security system for online commerce and banking in the late 1990s, Internet Explorer has been the sole gateway for financial transactions and for accessing most government websites.

The digital certificate that identifies the user during online banking and other transactions has to be downloaded, installed and operated through the Active X framework, an addition to Internet Explorer that is not available for Safari, Chrome, Opera or other web browsers. Users of such browsers were forced to switch to Internet Explorer to trade stocks, to do online banking or shop online.

"South Korea's unique certificate system, driven by the government, has led to the isolation of South Korea's IT," Ahn wrote in his policy pledge book released earlier this week. "Excessive use of Active X is making web browsing less convenient."

Ahn, a founder of South Korea's largest anti-virus software company, said his government will not obligate companies to use the established online security system. It will also encourage the development of alternatives to the current system.

Critics say the dominance of Internet Explorer in South Korea is attributable to the government's web policy.

StatCounter says Microsoft's web browser has an 83 percent market share in South Korea as of February, down from 93 percent a year earlier but still far ahead of runner up Google's Chrome browser with 10.3 percent. Internet Explorer's global market share is 36 percent.

While South Korea's broadband Internet is cheap, universal and fast, its web browsing environment has been criticized for limiting choices and being incompatible with the rest of the world.

Experts said the excessive use of Active X also made South Korean computer users more vulnerable to malware and viruses as it facilitated downloading and installing programs on the Internet without caution.

The state-run Korea Internet Security Agency said among 200 major South Korean websites, 74 percent used Active X as of July and its use was especially high among financial companies and online book sellers.

Some voters welcomed Ahn's pledge to end the mandatory, government-designated online certificate system, as many believed it had limited their choice of web browsers and computer operating system, as well as slowing down their computers.

"I think it is a well-made pledge," said Yu Kyu-yeol, a 30-year-old web developer. "I use Mac computer and every time to make payments online I had to turn on my Windows computer."

A former medical doctor and entrepreneur, Ahn is one of the three leading candidates for Dec. 19 presidential election.

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