

Aakash 4 launch likely to hit election roadblock



Aakash was developed as part of the country's programme of linking 25,000 colleges and 400 universities in an e-learning programme. The cost of the basic version for a student was only Rs.1,500. Photo: HT

The government's plan to commercially launch [Aakash 4](#), the fourth generation of the low-cost computer tablet promoted by minister of communications and information technology [Kapil Sibal](#), this month may be delayed.

Most companies that bid to manufacture the device failed to meet the technical specifications, because of which the process may be scrapped, according to a senior government official.

Starting a new process will not be possible due to the election code of conduct that will kick in once dates for the Lok Sabha polls are announced; this is expected later this week.

"There were 11 samples sent to us (by companies that bid), but almost all the samples had small or big problems," said [Rajat Moona](#), appellate authority and director general of the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (CDAC), the Pune-based research and development wing of the IT ministry that was the official testing agency for the tablets. Moona listed software and battery problems and said the companies would "now submit samples by the first week of March after rectifying the shortcomings".

If they still don't meet the specifications, the process will have to be scrapped, he admitted.

[Jayanth Kolla](#), founder of Convergence Catalyst, a research firm, said the real issue is timing. Once the elections are announced, the Election Commission's code of conduct comes into effect, preventing governments from doing anything that could even remotely influence voters. The announcement on election is imminent and given that, "if none of the bidders qualify for the specifications, the government won't be able to refloat the tender," said Kolla.

And if it doesn't happen in March, "the project might get delayed or even shut down," said [Manasi Yadav](#), senior market analyst at research firm [International Data Corp.](#) (IDC).

The government had been planning to launch Aakash 4 in the market by the end of March, eyeing a market worth Rs.500 crore in a year's time, according to the tender floated by the Directorate General of Supplies and Disposals (DGS&D) in January.

"Earlier it (Aakash 4) was supposed to hit the market by January and then again in the February, but because of the shortcomings, the whole process was delayed and now we expect it to be out in market by March-end," said Moona.

Moona confirmed that the ministry is looking at a Rs.500 crore market in a year, which translates to about 1.25 million units at a price of Rs.4,000.

[J. Satyanarayana](#), secretary, department of IT, sidestepped a question on the delay and said the process "is very much on. There are 10-12 companies which entered bidding process for the tender. Right now we are in procurement and testing stage. We will then be choosing the lowest bid and ask the companies to match it. The (overall) process should be completed by March".

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The newest version of the Aakash tablet is expected to have inbuilt support for Wi-Fi, bluetooth (also a wireless technology) as well as support for external devices including a storage device, keyboard, mouse, data connectivity (2G and 3G) dongles in India, a scratch and impact-resistant 7-inch LCD (liquid crystal display) screen and extended battery support.

The Aakash project, which started in 2011 with the first version of the low-cost computer tablets being supplied by Canada-based [Datawind Ltd](#), was criticized by students and experts for the poor quality and performance of the tablets.

Aakash 2, launched a year later also failed to impress. There was no Aakash 3; the next upgrade, called UbiSlate 7C+, was sold by Datawind.

Datawind's chief executive officer [Suneet Singh Tuli](#) said his company hopes to win the order "this time as well".

Analysts remain sceptical about the newest version of the tablet. "On paper, the technical specifications look fine, but the actual product might be different when translated in terms of user experience," said Kolla. The price is low and to meet the specifications, companies "may have to compromise on the quality of hardware", said IDC's Yadav, adding that earlier versions suffered from the same problem.