

India wants smartphone makers to share their source code for security

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REUTERS

NEW DELHI – India proposes requiring smartphone makers to share source code with the government and make several software changes as part of a raft of security measures, prompting behind-the-scenes opposition from giants like Apple and Samsung.

The tech companies have countered that the package of 83 security standards, which would also include a requirement to alert the government to major software updates, lacks any global precedent and risks revealing proprietary details, according to four people familiar with the discussions and a Reuters review of confidential government and industry documents.

The plan is part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts to boost security of user data as online fraud and data breaches increase in the world's second-largest smartphone market, with nearly 750 million phones.

IT Secretary S. Krishnan told Reuters that "any legitimate concerns of the industry will be addressed with an open mind," adding it was "premature to read more into it." A ministry spokesperson said it could not comment further due to ongoing consultation with tech companies on the proposals.

Apple, South Korea's Samsung, Google, China's Xiaomi and MAIT, the Indi-

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an industry group that represents the firms, did not respond to requests for comment.

Indian government requirements have irked technology firms before. In December, it revoked an order mandating a state-run cyber safety app on phones amid concerns over surveillance. But the government brushed aside lobbying last year and required rigorous testing for security cameras over fears of Chinese spying.

Xiaomi and Samsung – whose phones use Google's Android operating system – hold 19% and 15%, respectively, of India's market share and Apple 5%, Counterpoint Research estimates.

Among the most sensitive requirements in the new Indian Telecom Security Assurance Requirements is access to source code –the underlying programming instructions that make phones work. This would be analyzed and possibly tested at designated Indian labs, the documents show.

The Indian proposals also require companies to make software changes to allow pre-installed apps to be uninstalled and to block apps from using cameras and microphones in the background to "avoid malicious usage."

"Industry raised concerns that globally security requirements have not been mandated by any country," said a December IT ministry document detailing meetings that officials held with Apple, Samsung, Google and Xiaomi.

The security standards, drafted in 2023, are in the spotlight now as IT ministry and tech executives are due to meet on Jan. 13 for more discussions, sources said.

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India's proposals for "vulnerability analysis" and "source code review" would require smartphone makers to perform a "complete security assessment," after which test labs in India could check their claims through source code review and analysis.

"This is not possible ... due to secrecy and privacy," MAIT said in a confidential document drafted in response to the government proposal, and seen by Reuters. "Major countries in the EU, North America, Australia and Africa do not mandate these requirements."