

# Rulers want more time

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By WONG CHUN WAI

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Rulers want more time to study the draft constitutional amendments on royal immunity and will make known their stand after the meeting of the Conference of Rulers on Saturday.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said nothing conclusive came out of the informal meeting between the Rulers and senior Umno leaders at Istana Negara yesterday.

"They did not say yes or no. The meeting was inconclusive, but it did not mean the amendments were rejected or otherwise," the Prime Minister told reporters at his office immediately after their audience with the Rulers.

Dr Mahathir said, however, that some Rulers expressed their reservations on the proposed amendments and questioned the need to remove their immunity.

The Umno president said the delegation explained the rationale for the proposed amendments.

"We were frank and so were the Rulers. We explained clearly the reasons for our stand," he said.

All the Rulers, except the Sultan of Kelantan, attended the meeting which started at 3pm. Selangor was represented by its Regent as the Sultan is on holiday overseas.

The other Umno leaders in the delegation were deputy president Ghafar Baba, vice-presidents Datuk Seri Anwar

Ibrahim, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz were also present.

Dr Mahathir said the meeting started off with the Umno delegation explaining the proposed amendments.

"This was followed by a discussion and the Rulers finally asked to be given until Jan 16 to make their stand," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the party would have to wait until then to see whether the proposed amendments would be accepted by the Rulers.

He said he did not expect the proposed amendments to be easily accepted and that he was prepared for all possibilities.

Asked whether he was optimistic or pessimistic after the meeting, he replied: "I am neutral. I am very realistic."

To another question, Dr Mahathir said he did not know

whether the absence of the Sultan of Kelantan meant his rejection of the draft.

"I don't know what is his stand. You have to ask him," the Prime Minister said.

The Sultan of Kelantan was present at an unofficial meeting of the Rulers at Istana Negara in the morning. The one-hour meeting was their third since the Government made known its intention to amend the constitution.

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# Mahathir expects Bill to be accepted

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Dr Mahathir said no one asked why the Sultan of Kelantan was absent and "there was nobody from Kelantan to explain."

He also said the Cabinet and Umno supreme council had decided that the Bill would be tabled in Parliament even if the Rulers refused to give their consent.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had the right to debate the Bill in Parliament as it had yet to become law.

"No Bill becomes law until it is signed by the King. What happened in Parliament is merely a passage of the Bill," he said.

Asked whether the Government intended to delay the tabling of the Bill, he said the Dewan Rakyat had been informed of the special meetings on Jan 18 and 19 and Dewan Negara on Jan 20.

Dr Mahathir said he expected the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to give his assent to the Bill once it was passed by Parliament and "if he doesn't, we will then look into the matter."

Asked to comment on the opinion of some lawyers that the Bill must receive the Rulers' approval before being tabled in Parliament for it to become constitutional, Dr Mahathir said the Constitution was not very clear on that point.

He said the Government was prepared to face any move by the opposition to challenge the legality of the Bill.

"They are free to go to the courts. The nature of the opposition is to oppose," he added.

On the possibility of another informal meeting before Jan 16, he said Umno had carried out a thorough study of the amendments.

He said the Conference of Rulers meeting on Jan 16 would be attended by all the Rulers with the exception of the Yang di-Pertuas Negri of Penang, Malacca, Sabah and Sarawak.

"I will accompany the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and all the Mentris Besar will be present," he said.