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Anwar Ibrahim answering questions from students at SMU as part of the University's Ho Rih Hwa leadership lecture series.

SINGAPORE: When he watched Dr Mahathir Mohamad being sworn in as prime minister of Malaysia last May, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) leader Anwar Ibrahim has admitted feeling that he should have been the one getting the appointment.

Mr Anwar, who was serving a prison sentence at the time, watched Dr Mahathir's inauguration from a hospital ward after undergoing a surgery.

In a candid dialogue as part of the Ho Rih Hwa lecture series with hundreds of students from various Singapore schools at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on Thursday (Sep 20), Mr Anwar was asked by a student from Raffles Institution what was going through his mind when he was watching the ceremony.

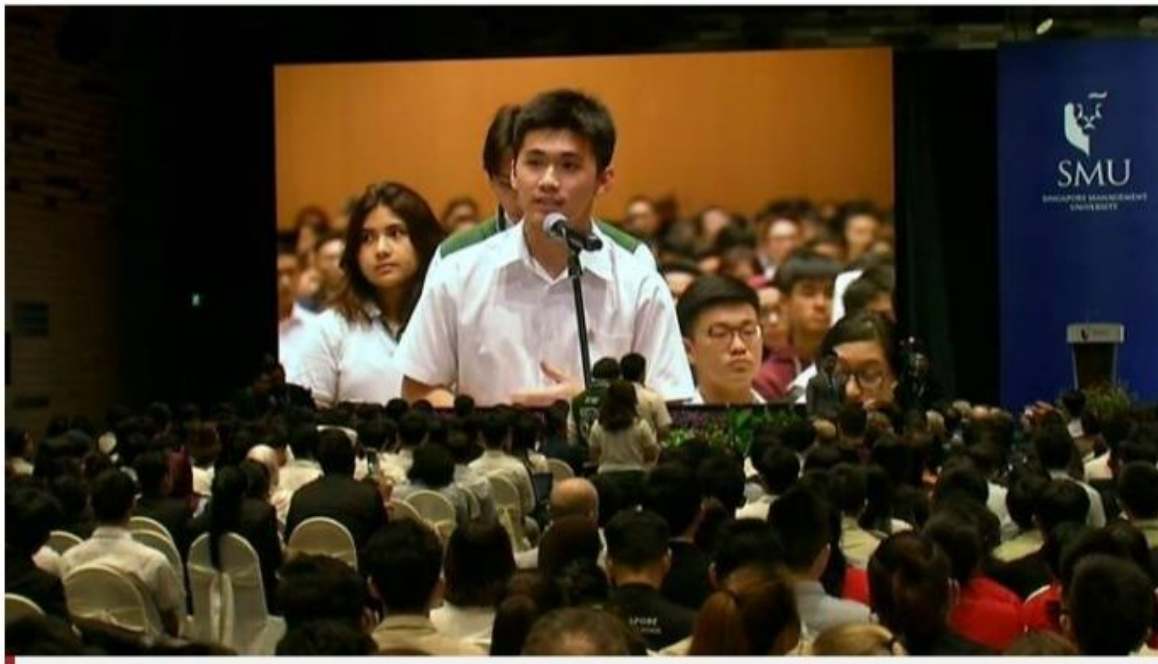
Mr Anwar said: "You want me to be honest or politically correct? Politically correct, of course I rejoiced, everybody was so elated. Look, Mahathir swearing in, (signaling a) new era for Malaysia. He came up with a statement saying that once Pakatan Harapan wins, they will then submit an application to the king for immediate pardon (for Anwar).

"But I also felt that I should have been there, you know? I did, I did," he said, waving his finger. "I do not want to lie to you, I did think about this - it should be me not you (Dr Mahathir)," he added, drawing laughter from the audience.

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Mr Anwar served as Dr Mahathir's deputy from 1993 to 1998, but was sacked after a row with his mentor and eventually arrested and jailed on disputed charges of sodomy and corruption. He was released in 2004, but convicted and jailed again for a second time for sodomy in 2015. Their relationship has since improved, with Dr Mahathir overseeing Mr Anwar's release from prison, and agreeing to pass the premiership to his former protege in two years.

Mr Anwar, making his second public appearance in Singapore since his release from prison, was peppered with questions from the students, hard hitting as well as light hearted ones.

One Temasek Junior College student asked Mr Anwar what it would take for political reform to happen in Singapore and if he thought the country was ready for it.

Mr Anwar replied: "I think to be fair and more objective, the Singapore issue or problem certainly cannot be compared to the fiasco in Malaysia. Nobody talks about endemic corruption or discrimination as you see it here.

"But whether they should move on to a more vibrant, democratic reform, that's for the Singaporeans to decide. But to compare with Malaysia, I think it is not right because we were at the stage where if ... change was not affected at the last election, Malaysia would certainly go down the drain."

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Anwar Ibrahim posing for a selfie with the audience at SMU.

Mr Anwar was also asked about the recent decision by the Malaysian Cabinet to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, and the 71-year-old stressed that he was "very much for" the decision.

"I've gone to schools and talked to university students who are 18, they are sometimes smarter than those in their 50s. But more importantly they're more idealistic, more principled and they hate corruption," he said.

Mr Anwar was also asked if he would retain current Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng in his post when he is appointed prime minister - and he replied jokingly: "Make me prime minister first, we settle one at a time."

A Malaysian student from Anglo Chinese Junior College asked about factions in his PKR party and how Mr Anwar planned to unite the two opposing camps led by Mr Azmin Ali and Mr Rafizi Ramli. The pair will also be contesting for the deputy president post in PKR's internal elections on Saturday.

Mr Anwar, who is set to assume the PKR presidency in November, stressed that the contest for the deputy president post will not divide the party.

"The only solution is to have no contest, then I will follow the North Korean method," he joked.

"If it's a democracy, you must tolerate differences. You must accept the fact that there are people who are campaigning."

"The vibrancy of the party and the democratic spirit is that they continue to enter the race, (contest to) win the elections. But it is my duty then as president to bring them together and give a suitable role for the person that has been defeated in the party elections. Because after all, this is an election among members of the family," said Mr Anwar.

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The dialogue lasted for almost two hours, with more than 20 students posing questions.

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