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Malaysian prime minister-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim has downplayed comparisons likening Singapore's political situation to that of Malaysia's.

SMU lecture talk

The 71-year-old former deputy prime minister made this comment, as well as many others, on Thursday, Sept. 20, at the 10th edition of the Ho Rih Hwa Leadership Lecture Series held at the Singapore Management University and moderated by SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping.

Asked about Singapore's political situation

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Photo from Singapore Management University Facebook.

Anwar's comments were in response to a query by an attendee.

The attendee compared Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's domination in Malaysian politics — which came to an abrupt end recently after losing the election — to the People's Action Party (PAP) long-standing position in Singapore, and asked about the possibility of political reform here following opposition victory up north.

However, the president of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and de facto leader of the ruling Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, stressed that it is "not right" to compare Singapore's political situation to that of Malaysia.

Anwar said Malaysia is in a "post-normal" state following PH's unexpected victory in the country's recent general election.

"To be fair and objective, Singapore's issue or problem certainly cannot be compared to the fiasco in Malaysia," he said. "Nobody talks about endemic corruption or discrimination as you see it here (Malaysia)."

He added that the issue is for Singaporeans to decide "whether they should move on to a more vibrant, democratic reform".

He also said: "(Malaysia) was in a state, if not handled (properly)... we would certainly go down the drain."

Defending Mahathir

Anwar also came to the defence of Malaysia prime minister, the feisty 93-year-old Mahathir Mohamad.

He said the public perception of Mahathir being an "unfriendly" leader is inaccurate.

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"He has strong views about some deals which he believed to be incorrect or that we are not in the position to implement due to costs," Anwar said, addressing the crowd of about 1,000 students from different schools and SMU faculty members.

Mahathir was Anwar's predecessor and former mentor.

Anwar was only released from prison in May this year after receiving a royal pardon and is set to succeed Mahathir in two years' time.



Not defending Mahathir

Anwar also gave a politically-incorrect reply when asked about his thoughts he had when he watched Mahathir's inauguration while still in prison.

He said he rejoiced as it was a new era for Malaysia, and also because it would mean that PH would submit an application to the king for Anwar's immediate pardon.

But he also gave an honest reply, saying that he did think that "it should be me not you (Mahathir)".

Singapore and Malaysia, okay relationship

Anwar also stressed that the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia is not "problematic", despite some outstanding issues.

He said: "To me, (the issue such as water) is not a problem that should cause tensions. There are issues that must be resolved as friends and as good neighbours in the interest of both countries."

Unbeknownst to the public, Anwar also said Mahathir has encouraged his ministers to visit Singapore, as seen by the number of exchanges and interactions between two countries in the last few months.

Anwar's SMU talk is his second public appearance in Singapore since being released from prison.

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Photo from Singapore Management University Facebook.

View of Singaporean politicians

Anwar also gave his take on Singaporean politicians.

He said Singapore's leaders are "smart, competent, but too serious at times".

In contrast, Malaysia's leaders are less officious, as they are "a bit kawan-kawan (Malay for "friends")", and practise a lot of "give and take".

These comments drew laughter from the crowd.

Leaders' relationship with people

But on a more serious note, Anwar said that Singapore-Malaysia relations should be cultivated and maintained on a personal level, beyond the "structured context and governance".

And as leaders, he said they are expected to sacrifice as much as the people.

He said: "Leaders cannot live in such opulence with all the diamonds in the world and yet ask the common people to sacrifice for the sake of the country."

All photos via Singapore Management University Facebook