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Watching Dr Mahathir Mohamad being sworn in Malaysia's prime minister in May from his hospital bed, premier-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim could not help but think that "it should have been (him)".

"(If I were to be) politically correct, of course I was overjoyed, everyone was overjoyed, so elated," Mr Anwar said on Thursday (Sept 20) at the Ho Rih Hwa Leadership lecture at the Singapore Management University (SMU). "Look, (with) Mahathir's swearing in... (it was a) new era for Malaysia.

"But I also feel I should have been there. I don't want to lie about this. I did think about this: 'It should be me, not you'", the 71-year-old admitted without elaborating, drawing laughter and cheers from the 1,200-strong audience made up of students, academics and Singapore government officials.

He was serving a jail term for sodomy and was in hospital when the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition ousted the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition in the May general election. It was the second time he had landed in jail for sodomy — he was first jailed after Dr Mahathir sacked him as deputy prime minister in 1998. The two former foes joined forces under Pakatan Harapan to topple former premier Najib Razak.

The session with Mr Anwar, titled Leadership in the 21st Century: Winds of Change, marked his second public appearance here in less than a week, after he spoke last Saturday (Sept 15) at the Singapore Summit, a conference for business and thought leaders to discuss business and global affairs.

During the hour-long question-and-answer session at SMU, he fielded wide-ranging questions that touched on bilateral ties between Singapore and Malaysia, youth activism and his plans as prime minister.

Mr Anwar is expected to take over from Dr Mahathir in two years. Asked what he plans to do when he assumes the position, Mr Anwar said, again drawing laughter: "Make me PM first, lah. We settle one at a time."

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He is due to contest in a by-election for the Port Dickson seat on Oct 13, paving the way for his return to Parliament.

Dishing out advice to young students who wished to champion alternative views, Mr Anwar said that it requires "conviction" to champion causes such as the rights of the marginalised and oppressed.

"When you start to believe in something, you cannot be inhibited by boundaries. Of course you don't go and kill people, but express your views. You must have the courage to express your views in an open forum... You must know that you study not just to become successful professionals; you must aim to serve."

Mr Anwar first made his name as a student leader of an Islamic youth organisation, founding the youth movement Abim before quickly rising up the political ranks.

His belief in young Malaysians kept him going, including during his second jail term from 2015 for allegedly sodomising a former aide.

"The majority of the young support me and (my) cause," he said. "It is because of my trust in the spirit of the young Malaysians that compelled me to return to Malaysia, back to jail for three-and-a-half years."

Following Pakatan Harapan's election victory in May, he was freed after receiving a royal pardon from the Malaysian king.

Mr Anwar said that he supports the announcement this week by the Malaysian Cabinet to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 — predicated on a free media. Work on amending the Federal Constitution will begin soon.

"More importantly, (the students who are 18) are more idealistic in principle. They hate corruption... certainly I have more trust in the aptitude and capacity of the young to be fair."

Asked by SMU chairman and session moderator Ho Kwon Ping about potentially "problematic" issues between Singapore and Malaysia, Anwar reiterated that Malaysia would stand to benefit from good relations with Singapore.

While he conceded that there were issues such as water resources, he said that it was "not a problem that should cause tensions between two states" and should be resolved as "friends and good neighbours" do.

Responding to a question on the rivalry between Malaysian Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali and former member of parliament Rafizi Ramli, Mr Anwar said he does not believe that the internal elections of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) would divide the party.

Mr Anwar is the president-elect of PKR, a component party of Pakatan Harapan. Both Mr Azmin and Mr Rafizi are competing for the post of PKR's deputy president.

"They are two personalities, both are smart, intelligent, both have a good track record, why is it going to divide the party? If this is a democracy, you must tolerate differences," Mr Anwar said.

Rebutting media reports which painted the two deputies as being caught in a bitter rivalry, Mr Anwar said that it was his duty as party leader to "bring (the two) together and give the person who is defeated a suitable role".