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It is up to Singaporeans to decide whether they want to pursue “vibrant” democratic reform in their country, said Malaysia’s former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim on Thursday (20 September).

Speaking at the 10th edition of the Ho Rih Hwa Leadership Lecture Series held at the Singapore Management University, Anwar was responding to an attendee’s question on the possibility of political reform in Singapore in light of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition’s historic victory in the recent Malaysian general elections (GE).

The president of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and de facto leader of PH, stressed that it is “not right” to compare Singapore’s political situation with that of Malaysia.

Anwar described Malaysia as being in a “post-normal” state following PH’s unexpected victory in the GE, which saw the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition lose control of power for the first time in Malaysia’s history.

The attendee who asked the question had compared BN’s domination of Malaysia’s political scene with the People’s Action Party’s longstanding position as Singapore’s ruling party.

“To be fair, Singapore’s issue or problem cannot be compared to the fiasco in Malaysia. Nobody talks about endemic corruption or discrimination as you see in (Malaysia),” he said. “(Malaysia) was in a state, if not handled (properly)...we would certainly go down the drain.”

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### Mahathir not an 'unfriendly' leader

The 71-year-old former political detainee was released from prison in May after receiving a royal pardon and is set to succeed Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in two years, as agreed upon by PH leaders prior to the GE.

On his predecessor and former mentor, Anwar said that the common view of Mahathir being an "unfriendly" leader is inaccurate.

"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," he added.

Anwar stressed that despite several prickly issues – such as the water agreement – the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia is not "problematic".

In May, Mahathir had also pledged to scrap the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High-Speed Rail deal that was signed with the previous administration, citing the need to reduce Malaysia's RM1 trillion (S\$337 billion) debt.

"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," said Anwar, before playfully thanking a 1,200-strong crowd consisting of students from different schools, SMU stakeholders and faculty members in Japanese.

He added that Mahathir has, in fact, encouraged his ministers to visit Singapore, to a point where there has been an unprecedented number of exchanges between the two country's leaders over the "last four months".

"(I) myself has come to Singapore twice this week," said Anwar, referring to the Singapore Summit event he attended last Saturday. Thursday's SMU appearance marked Anwar's second public appearance in Singapore since being released from prison.

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Regarding Singaporean politicians, he noted that the nation's leaders are "smart, competent but too serious at times". By comparison, Malaysia's leaders tend to be "a bit kawan-kawan (Malay for "friends")" and practice a lot of "give and take", he said, drawing laughter from the crowd.

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

**'Incorrigible optimist'**

Describing himself as an "incorrigible optimist", Anwar also spoke at length about the qualities of leadership needed in the 21st century. Beyond leading by example, modern leaders should also demonstrate "compassion and forgiveness", he added.