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SINGAPORE - As he watched his former nemesis Mahathir Mohamad being sworn in as Malaysia's seventh prime minister on TV on May 10, Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim thought to himself from his hospital bed: "It should be me, not you."

On hearing this candid response to a question from a student at Singapore Management University (SMU) on Thursday (Sept 20), the audience of about 1,200 students, academics and diplomats broke into laughter and clapped wildly.

For an hour, Datuk Seri Anwar, de facto leader of Malaysia's ruling Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, was quizzed on a range of issues from Singapore-Malaysia bilateral relations and plans when he becomes Malaysia's prime minister, to what keeps him awake at night.

Said the charismatic reformer, referring to his wife, Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail: "What keeps me awake at night is Azizah, if she doesn't bother me I can sleep."

The robust question-and-answer session was the highlight of the session with Mr Anwar, titled Leadership in the 21st Century: Winds of Change. It is part of SMU's Ho Rih Hwa Leadership Lecture Series with notable entrepreneurs, business leaders and political figures.

Mr Anwar peppered his speech with quotes from poets and philosophers, and touched on ongoing trade tensions between the United States and China, the need to nurture creative minds and the need for leaders to maintain values such as humility and compassion.

He also said that oppression and discrimination must not be condoned. "I will not ever compromise the need to respect freedom and justice. I do not want any Malaysians deprived of his or her rights."

The lecture was his second public appearance in Singapore since his release from prison in May, following a royal pardon for a sodomy conviction he maintains was politically motivated.

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At the Singapore Summit 2018 last Saturday, he had stressed the importance of strengthening ties between Malaysia and Singapore and said the Republic was among the first countries he would visit when he becomes prime minister.

Thursday's lecture came hours after Malaysia's Election Commission (EC) announced that the by-election for Port Dickson, needed to pave the way for Mr Anwar's return to Parliament, will be held on Oct 13.

Nomination day is on Sept 29. A total of 75,770 people are eligible to vote in the constituency.

The 71-year-old was upbeat about his chances. The Barisan Nasional opposition coalition has yet to name its candidate.

Said Mr Anwar: "Some people say why should you (face a) challenge, you should win uncontested. Okay, but who am I to claim I'm the supremo that nobody can challenge, no. I welcome a challenge... I will have to appeal to the voters."

Mr Anwar compares the looming by-election to the battle between his former protege, Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali, and party vice-president Rafizi Ramli for the deputy president post at his Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), which is expected to be held on Sept 22.

"Both are smart, intelligent, (have a) good track record, why is it going to divide the party? The only solution is to have no contest and then I will follow the North Korean method," Mr Anwar quipped.

"If this is a democracy, you must tolerate differences, you must accept the fact that people will campaign," he added.

This internal contest has already created camps in the party whose logo - two white crescents on a blue background, resembling an eye - is a symbol of the black eye Mr Anwar received when the former deputy PM was beaten by Dr Mahathir's then police chief on the night of his arrest on Sept 20, 1998.

Mr Anwar is now set to take over from Dr Mahathir in about two years, as agreed to by the PH leadership. Asked what he plans to do when he becomes PM, Mr Anwar said, to laughter: "Make me PM first, lah. We settle one at a time."