Legal services for the region

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An export sector

Legal services have become a sector that the government measures and promotes like any other service industry. Their nominal value-added rose from S$2.36 billion in 2018 to S$2.98 billion in 2023, an increase of more than 25 %. Over the same period, exports of legal services rose from S$1.04 billion to S$1.40 billion, by nearly 35 %.[1] Exports are therefore equivalent to close to half of the sector's value-added, although the two measures are not strictly comparable because exports are counted as revenue.

The export figures reflect several flows. Foreign clients pay Singapore lawyers to draft and negotiate cross-border transactions, to conduct arbitrations and litigation in Singapore and to advise on regional regulatory matters. International firms book in Singapore part of the work they do for Asian clients. Parties from outside Singapore pay arbitrators, experts and hearing venues in Singapore. Each of these flows depends on the willingness of foreign parties to choose Singapore law or a Singapore forum.

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Arbitration, the SICC and mediation

Dispute resolution is the most visible part of the export. SIAC's caseload, cited above, makes it one of the leading arbitral institutions in the world. The international arbitration survey of 2025 by Queen Mary University of London and White & Case named London, Singapore, Hong Kong, Beijing and Paris as the five most preferred seats. London and Singapore ranked among the top five seats in each of the six regions covered.[2]

The SICC and the Singapore International Mediation Centre complete the offer. In his speech of 2024, the Second Minister for Law observed that SIAC administers many cases with no direct connection to Singapore, which is the definition of an export. He reported that the SICC caseload had risen by about 30 % in 2023 and that the mediation centre had recorded its highest number of cases since it began operations. He also noted that the Singapore Convention on Mediation had 56 signatories and 14 parties at that time.[3] Chapters II and III of Part F describe these institutions and the Convention. In the present context, they matter because they allow a contract governed by Singapore law to be enforced through three different routes, chosen in advance by the parties.

The regional client base

The SIAC statistics cited above show where the clients come from, with mainland China, Vietnam, India and Thailand at the head of the list. Parties from these countries choose Singapore for overlapping reasons. Chinese companies investing in Southeast Asia look for a neutral forum acceptable to their local partners. Indian companies have long used Singapore as a seat, partly because of doubts about the speed of domestic proceedings. Vietnamese and Thai companies, which trade with counterparties from many countries, need a common ground that neither side regards as foreign.

The regional role of Singapore law also follows the regional role of Singapore business. Regional headquarters, described in Chapter I of Part I, sign intra-group and third-party contracts from Singapore and often choose its law for them. Holding

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companies and funds domiciled in Singapore, examined in Part E, adopt Singapore law for their constitutions and shareholder arrangements. Investment into India and Indonesia, which Chapters III and IV of Part I discuss, often runs through Singapore entities whose agreements are governed by Singapore law. The legal sector thereby earns a share of the region's cross-border investment without needing to market itself separately.

Singapore firms abroad

Singapore law practices have followed their clients. Several of the larger local firms have opened offices or formed alliances in China, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam and the Gulf, while others work through regional networks.[4] The government has supported this expansion and has developed exchanges with neighbouring legal communities. The Singapore–Shanghai Lawyers Exchange Programme, for example, received an inaugural batch of ten lawyers from Shanghai.[5] Such programmes build the personal networks through which future clients choose their advisers.

The promotion of Singapore law

The Singapore Academy of Law lists the international promotion of Singapore law among its functions. It publishes the law reports, operates LawNet and has run Singapore Law Watch, a daily legal news service, since 2008.[6] The promotion of a governing law is a slow business. It works through the accessibility of the law, through publications in English that explain Singapore law to foreign lawyers and through the visible quality of the courts. A law that cannot be found or understood will not be chosen, however good its content.

Common misconception

Singapore law is sometimes described as English law applied in Singapore. Since 1993 English statutes form part of Singapore law only where the Application of English Law Act or a Singapore statute so provides. Since 1994 the Court of Appeal has developed the common law on its own authority. Although English decisions

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remain persuasive and are often followed, Singapore courts interpret a contract governed by Singapore law according to Singapore precedent. Advisers who assume that every recent English judgment applies in Singapore may give wrong advice on points where the Court of Appeal has taken a different view.

Notes

1. Ministry of Law, Response Speech by Second Minister for Law Edwin Tong at the Committee of Supply Debate 2024, 1 March 2024, mlaw.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): nominal value-added of legal services increased "by more than 25%, from S$2.36 billion in 2018 to S$2.98 billion in 2023"; exports increased "by nearly 35%, from S$1.04 billion in 2018 to S$1.40 billion in 2023". ↩
2. White & Case and Queen Mary University of London, *2025 International Arbitration Survey: The Path Forward: Realities and Opportunities in Arbitration*, executive summary, p. 2, and p. 5 (qmul.ac.uk, accessed November 2026): "The five most preferred seats for arbitration are London, Singapore, Hong Kong, Beijing and Paris. London and Singapore rank among the top five seats for each of the six regions"; 2,402 respondents. ↩
3. Ministry of Law, Committee of Supply Debate 2024, speech of 1 March 2024 (mlaw.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): SIAC "administers many cases which do not have a connection directly to Singapore"; SICC caseload rose "by about 30%" in the previous year; SIMC recorded its highest number of cases; the Singapore Convention on Mediation had 56 signatories and 14 Parties. ↩
4. Overseas offices and alliances of Singapore law practices in the region. ↩
5. Ministry of Law, Committee of Supply Debate 2024 (mlaw.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): the Singapore–Shanghai Lawyers Exchange Programme hosted an inaugural batch of 10 Shanghai lawyers. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Singapore Academy of Law" (accessed November 2026): functions include "International Promotion of Singapore Law"; Singapore

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Law Watch launched in 2008; LawNet first incepted in 1988, LawNet 2 launched in 2007; Academy Publishing launched in 2007. ↩

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