

# THE BUSINESS TIMES

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## S'pore law firms among Asia's best: report

UK's Legalese Ltd picks Rajah & Tann as well as Allen & Gledhill as top in various categories

### BT exclusive

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[SINGAPORE]

Here's a question that crosses the minds of many laymen and intrigues even lawyers themselves: Which are Singapore's top law firms?

And how do they compare with their Asian counterparts?

While no comprehensive survey has been conducted, Britain's Legalese Ltd has taken a crack at providing the answers in the latest edition of its Asia Pacific Legal 500, a ranking of top law firms in the region.

Based on interviews with law firms and many of their clients, the publication picks the top firms in each country in seven practice areas -- corporate, construction, information technology, intellectual property, dispute resolution, real estate, and shipping.

Emerging in the top tier in four categories in Singapore was Rajah & Tann, while Allen & Gledhill (A&G) was tops in two.

However, in the corporate field -- which encompasses not only mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures but also capital markets, banking and finance -- A&G was the undisputed leader, with managing partner Lucien Wong regarded by many as Singapore's top corporate lawyer.

### Legal eagles

*Singapore's top law firms*

SECTOR	FIRM
Corporate	Allen & Gledhill
Construction	Chan Tan & Partners Donaldson & Burkinshaw Khattar Wong & Partners Rajah & Tann
Information technology	Rajah & Tann Rodyk & Davidson Shook Lin & Bok
Intellectual property	Drew & Napier
Dispute resolution	Allen & Gledhill Drew & Napier Rajah & Tann
Real Estate	Khattar Wong & Partners
Shipping	Rajah & Tann

Source: Asia Pacific Legal 500

A&G's leadership, said the AP Legal 500, was even more pronounced in finance. A&G has both a corporate department and a financial services department with about a dozen lawyers in each.

The second tier of corporate/finance lawyers include Arfat Selvam & Gunasingham, Colin Ng & Partners, Drew & Napier, Lee & Lee, Rajah & Tann, and Wong Partnership.

In terms of size, Singapore firms are among the region's largest and with the most expertise. "Singapore is also replete with smaller niche practices where some of the best corporate lawyers are to be found," the AP Legal 500 said.

It also found that the best lawyers here "compared favourably to those anywhere in the world and there is a solid second tier to draw on that is more than adequate for the vast majority of transactions".

Three firms have more than 100 lawyers -- A&G, Rajah & Tann, and Drew & Napier. About half a dozen have between 50 and 100 lawyers, including Khattar Wong & Partners, Colin Ng & Partners, Lee & Lee, and Wong Partnership.

The other practice areas yielded the following findings:

◆ Drew & Napier remains Singapore's leading intellectual property law practitioner here with its IP department headed by the respected former judicial commissioner Joseph Grimberg.

The department handles one-third of all trademark registrations in Singapore and has a thriving patents practice.

◆ In dispute resolution, A&G's Michael Hwang, another former judicial commissioner, is highly regarded and advises on a wide range of commercial litigation including commodities and futures disputes, insurance and reinsurance, banking and company law.

◆ In real estate, although many firms here claim capability in handling property and conveyancing work, Khattar Wong & Partners is regarded as the clear leader, despite some attrition among its lawyers. The sector, which was badly affected by the sharp downturn in property prices and transactions over the last two years, is now beginning to recover.

◆ Rajah & Tann tops the shipping sector with the movement of Steven Chong and his team from Drew & Napier enhancing its position.

◆ In construction, Chan Tan & Partners is said to be Singapore's only specialist practice with two engineers and a surveyor. Rajah & Tann's Sundaresh Menon is also regarded to be among the top construction lawyers here.

◆ As Singapore embraces the information revolution, local lawyers are beginning to develop a specialist capability in IT, the survey notes. Rajah & Tann's capabilities were enhanced through the recruitment of Daniel Seng, formerly a senior lecturer in IT Law at the National University of Singapore.

But there are also complaints that "quality and turnaround times can be variable and that too often you have to rely on getting a particular partner if you want something done properly".

That these shortcomings exist is a reflection of the changing nature of the Singapore economy and the bar on foreign firms practising Singapore law, the AP Legal 500 said.

This in turn has made it difficult for local lawyers to gain experience in top-flight international and corporate practices, especially in such financial areas as securitisation, project finance and structured finance.

The shortcomings, however, have been recognised by the authorities, leading to the proposed liberalisation of the sector and the encouragement of joint ventures and alliances between local and foreign firms.