

FIRMS TO WATCH 2018

As in other years, the ALB Firms To Watch list for 2018 showcases a diverse mix of law firms, including a Philippine firm that's more than six decades old, a fast-expanding Korean firm that looks to offer a counter to the Big Six, and at least four outfits that were set up by lawyers leaving more established firms.

LIST BY ALB TEXT BY RAJ GUNASHEKAR



ANSS COUNSELLORS AT LAW (ANSS)

Founded: 2016 / **Office Location:** Jakarta, Indonesia / **Partners:** 4

The four partners of ANSS have impressive backgrounds, including stints at Budiarto Law Partnership, Assegaf Hamzah & Partners, Hiswara Bunjamin & Tandjung, Oentoeng Suria & Partners and Credit Suisse. The managing partner is **Arselan Ruslan**. The recent growth in the finance and technology sectors in Indonesia has given the firm the opportunity to assist startups in the country – particularly those in the fintech space – as well as investors wanting to invest in Indonesian startups. Looking ahead, ANSS is keen to secure more work from MNCs and foreign companies that have business interest in Indonesia. “Trust and expertise in our previous roles are the main drivers that supported our growth for the past 12 months. We managed to position ANSS as a new player in the market that could provide premium legal services at reasonable rates,” says Ivan Nugroho, one of ANSS’ partners.



BRYAN CAVE

Year Established In Asia: 1994 / **Asia Office Locations:** Hong Kong, Shanghai / **Asia Partners:** 5

The St. Louis, Missouri-headquartered Bryan Cave is currently involved in merger discussions with Berwin Leighton Pasiner that could lead to a new law firm with 32 offices in 12 countries. In Hong Kong, however, the focus is on the burgeoning fintech scene, which is also an area of priority for the local government; Bryan Cave has developed a close working relationship with InvestHK to highlight the benefits of starting fintech businesses in the SAR. As part of this focus, the firm is at the moment looking to hire at least two more partners in Hong Kong, as well as associates, to bolster its fintech and regulatory and compliance teams. “Fintech is a market that is ever growing and developing. With blockchain and cryptocurrencies becoming a bigger part of daily life, we have been actively stepping into the space to provide regulatory advice and assistance to cutting-edge and innovative clients,” says **Kristi Swartz**, the office managing partner.



CLOVE LEGAL

Founded: 2013 / **Office Location:** Mumbai, India / **Partners:** 2

Another firm benefiting from the exponential growth in its country's startup ecosystem is India's Clove Legal, which has seen a boost to its M&A and PE practice as a result. Additionally, the firm has seen growth in its insolvency practice thanks to the introduction of India's new bankruptcy law, which has led to an increasing number of filing of insolvency proceedings by the firm. As a result, Clove has been expanding, adding three fee-earners in that period, and witnessing a revenue increase of 20 percent. The firm is also looking forward to adding more fee-earners including associates who will join the firm in the next six months to cater to the growing demand; expansion of its PE and litigation practices is also on the cards. In terms of significant work, the firm was actively involved in advising Mswipe Technologies Private Limited, a mobile point of sale (POS) service provider, in the acquisition of the offline merchant-acquiring business of PayU Payments. "Due to the change in the approach of the PE and VC funds, the average value of the transactions has come down while the number of deals has increased, which has worked out favourably for us," says **Amit Sirsikar**, Clove Legal's co-founder and partner.



KARNOVA & CO

Founded: 2017 / **Office Location:** Jakarta, Indonesia / **Partners:** 2

In October last year, **Muhammad Karnova**, a former partner at Hadiputranto, Hadinoto & Partners (HHP), Baker McKenzie's network firm in Indonesia, left the firm to set up his own practice. However, despite having been in business for only a few months, Karnova & Co is already doing impressive work: The firm has acted for a French-headquartered global energy company in its Indonesian renewable energy project and also represented an Indonesian state-owned mining company in connection with its project finance matters. Looking ahead, Karnova wants to focus on limited areas of practice, instead of becoming a one-stop service provider for all the legal needs of its clients. "We are looking to hire a number of fee-earners at various levels within the first semester of 2018," says Karnova. "At this point of time, we would want to focus internally to develop a deep bench of highly qualified team members and get as much as transactional mandates as we can get. We would limit our representation to transactional matters such as M&A and corporate finance across multiple industries and business sectors."



LIM JO YAN & CO

Founded: 2017 / **Office Location:** Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia / **Partners:** 1

The only Malaysian firm on this year's list was founded by **Lim Jo Yan**, former partner and heading of the corporate and commercial practice group at MahWengKwai & Associates. The firm was founded with a goal for helping a specialised corporate and commercial law firm. Primarily acting for PE firms, VCs, listed and private companies, Japanese corporations, family offices, high-net-worth families and individuals, the firm wants to shine in the mid-market M&A which will continue to be the firm's core practice. It also focuses on regulated industries like telecommunication, healthcare, education and transportation. Among recent work, Lim Jo Yan & Co assisted HSC Healthcare International in the acquisition of 80 percent of the issued and paid-up share capital of a healthcare provider. For 2018, the firm is ambitiously targeting a minimum of 50 percent revenue growth. "In 2018, we are further eyeing corporate governance, board disputes, e-commerce, logistics and digital platform opportunities," says Lim.



MEER MEER & MEER

Founded: 1951 / **Office Location:** Manila, Philippines / **Partners:** 4

The only law firm from the Philippines to feature in this year's Firms To Watch list, Meer Meer & Meer (Meer Law) is also the oldest Asian firm, having been founded by Bibiano L. Meer in 1951. Two years ago, the firm

underwent something of a reboot with the arrival of the husband-and-wife duo of Rafael and Amanda Meer, who previously worked at Romulo Mabanta Buenaventura Sayoc and de los Angeles. Since then, revenues have jumped – 58 percent between 2015 and 2016, and a projected increase of 50 percent between 2016 and 2017 – and in the past year, Meer Law has added four fee-earners, with more hires foreseen to cater to client demands. According to the firm, the need for smaller law firms in providing quality, personal and efficient top-calibre lawyering without the bureaucracy and fees associated with a bigger law firm has turned into a bigger advantage for it. In the next 12 months, it expects to pursue avenues for further growth of its existing practice areas. Meer Law’s managing partner is **Lamberto L. Meer**.



MORLEY CHOW SETO

Founded: 2014 / **Office Location:** Hong Kong / **Partners:** 4

Morley Chow Seto was formed in 2014, when former Haldanes partners Christopher Morley, **Anita Chow** and Eric Seto left to set up their own firm. Since then, the boutique has received a number of accolades, including being a finalist in both the Criminal Law Firm of the Year and the Boutique Law Firm of the Year categories at The Macallan ALB Hong Kong Law Awards for the past three years, and picking up the Rising Law Firm of the Year award in 2016. Much of this success is of course down to the expertise of the founding partners, who have more than 75 years of collective experience in criminal defence work. Interestingly, the firm does not employ secretaries leading to a large cut in expenses. “The resulting saving on costs also allows for a reduction in bureaucracy and allows our fees to remain competitive,” says Chow. Another point of pride for the firm is its website; unlike other criminal law firms’ websites, the Morley Chow Seto website is intended as a go-to resource for criminal law practitioners and clients who can find and locate readily accessible information on criminal law matters that are frequently encountered.



NAIR & CO

Founded: 2017 / **Office Location:** Singapore / **Partners:** 4

Another example of an industry veteran striking out on his own, Nair & Co. was set up by **Suresh Nair**, who had stints at Allen & Gledhill (until 2013), then Straits Law Practice, and finally Advocatus Law until setting up his own shop in 2017. Nair’s diverse client base ranges from multinational companies and banks to international law firms, to shareholders dealing with boardroom disputes, all the way to an animal welfare group. While insolvency and restructuring and disputes make up the bulk of work, the firm has also added two corporate/commercial lawyers in the past year - director Jean Foo and associate director Loh Zhi Jun. As part of its expansion strategy, the firm is developing alliances internationally and domestically and gain recognition through engagement with clients and potential clients, including institutions. “There are many opportunities to exploit, especially in the insolvency and arbitration spheres. We hope to see a controlled expansion and being able to offer clients a broader range of legal services,” says Nair.



NASOETION & ATYANTO

Founded: 2013 / **Office Location:** Jakarta, Indonesia / **Partners:** 2

Another of the new generation of young, hungry Indonesian law firm, Nasoetion & Atyanto is seeing its star rise: In 2017, it witnessed a 20 percent increase in revenues compared to the same period last year, and also added two fee-earners. Key work in the past year included representing Bumi Resources in its rights issue for the amount of approximately \$2 billion. It also acted for Bank Windu Kentjana International in its merger with Bank Antardaerah and change of its name into Bank China Construction Bank Indonesia. In another representation, the firm advised Alfa Energi Investama in its IPO for \$11 million. “Clients are more and more cost-conscious. We see this as an opportunity and offer very competitive fee structures to the clients without sacrificing the quality of the services,” says managing partner **Genio Atyanto**. “Our growth is supported by our existing clients who repetitively using our services.”



ORNE HANEUL ATTORNEYS-AT-LAW

Founded: 2013 / **Office Location:** Seoul, South Korea / **Partners:** 4

The Korean law firm of Orne Haneul may be small, with just four partners, but it has big plans regionally. Last year the firm signed a MoU with Chinese law firm Broad & Bright, which has offices in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Tokyo, giving it an edge in expanding its network to Mainland China, Hong Kong and Japan. For further growth, the firm is planning to seek cooperation with law firms in Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. It is also expanding by headcount: in the past year, the firm added one partner and two associates as it saw revenues increase by 50 percent; soon, it expects to see two to three more partners and several associates join from leading Korean law firms. Recent work has included advising a Korean company's acquisition of a stake in a Dutch company, representing a compensation claim related to a defect in the construction of an underground tunnel, and advising on a joint venture investment deal between a Korean company and a Chinese company. The managing partner is **Jongmin Lee**.



PETER DORAISAMY

Founded: 2017 / **Office Location:** Singapore / **Partners:** 2

Established in January 2017, the firm was founded by managing director **Peter Doraisamy**, who was a partner at Duane Morris & Selvam in Singapore. Currently, the firm has a headcount of 10 and offers personalised and approachable partner-level services in an efficient and cost-effective manner. The firm also works closely with other like-minded law firms in the growing economies of Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines. "Through this informal network, we are able to assist our clients as they expand their business activities in the ASEAN region," says Doraisamy. As an independent law firm, it is often briefed by foreign law firms and other local firms to act as Singapore counsel in matters against major institutions and corporations. In association with HFI Consulting International -- a specialist consulting and legal services provided -- the firm is assisting players in the energy and water sectors to expand successfully across international markets with a focus on the ASEAN region.



SEYFARTH SHAW

Year Established In Asia: 2013 / **Asia Office Locations:** Shanghai, Hong Kong / **Asia Partners:** 6

Seyfarth Shaw, the second U.S. (and non-Asian) firm on the list doubled its Asia presence in 2017 with the opening of a Hong Kong office. Seyfarth, known for its labour and employment law practice, hired DLA Piper's Asia employment head **Julia Gorham** to help launch the office and also recruited Raymond Wong from King & Wood Mallesons, where he was a corporate partner, as the office's managing partner. The Hong Kong office serves as Seyfarth's regional hub to service clients' growing cross-border specialist employment and corporate and commercial needs on a Pan-Asian basis as well as locally in Hong Kong. "Seyfarth itself is a specialist international employment law firm -- that's its genesis -- which is something the other firms don't have. For the other big international firms that do employment law, their biggest teams are usually their corporate transactional teams, not their employment law group," says Gorham. "At Seyfarth, international employment will be my top priority. This specialisation, when combined with Ray's corporate expertise, will position Seyfarth to compete with established firms in Hong Kong, and Asia."



SPICE ROUTE LEGAL

Founded: 2016 / **Office Locations:** Bengaluru, Mumbai And New Delhi, India / **Partners:** 2

Spice Route Legal opened in December 2016, and in just a year, saw the size of its team jump threefold from seven lawyers to 21. The firm says its primary growth engines are M&A/PE, TMT, defence and renewables. "We have seen over a 100 percent growth in each of these practice areas in the last one year and we expect significant

growth to continue,” says **Praveen Raju**, founding partner of the firm. It is planning on expanding into IP, securities law and disputes, as well as set up offices in other Indian cities like Pune and Hyderabad. The firm is also in the process of expanding to a new jurisdiction outside India. Key recent work has included advising Indian bioscience company Indfrag on its \$80 million sale to Everstone-backed OmniActive Health Technologies, and also advising a leading Korean technology conglomerate on Indian law related to navigation technology. “Among Indian firms, we expect to have an unrivalled global footprint within the next five years,” says Raju. “We intend to alter our boutique mindset, as teams practicing IP, securities law and disputes join us in 2018.”



VANGUARD LAWYERS TOKYO

Founded: 2017 / **Office Location:** Tokyo, Japan / **Partners:** 3

Vanguard Lawyers Tokyo came into existence in September 2017 as a spin-off from Freshfields Tokyo’s Japanese employment law and litigation practice. Since then it has already worked on a number of new mandates, including various employment litigation representing global firms with operations in Japan, two harassment investigations and two large fraud investigations. It won a significant victory in the Tokyo High Court in relation to a large litigation relating to the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant accident. The firm’s main growth strategy is through providing high-quality specialised Japanese law advice to international clients. “Now that we are independent, we have more flexibility on matters such as pricing and client base. We also face far less issues with conflicts,” says partner Naoki Kinami. For the next one year, the firm says it will focus on four areas. “On our Japanese employment practice, we are focusing on expanding our client base, especially our client sectors so that we can engage in a wider variety of mandates,” says **Akiko Yamakawa**, managing partner. “We are also focusing on expanding the types of disputes we work on for our domestic disputes practice and have already started to work on a number of exciting new mandates.”

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