Singapore sharpens appeal as crypto arbitration hub with SIAC rule revamp

Singapore is tightening its grip on crypto-related disputes as new SIAC rules and a growing body of court decisions give parties faster remedies and more certainty over digital assets. The changes arrive at a time when cross-border token offerings, complex smart-contract ecosystems and a rising number of retail investors are turning crypto fall-outs into multi-party, multi-jurisdictional fights.

The SIAC Rules 2025 introduce an expanded emergency arbitrator regime, tools to consolidate and coordinate related arbitrations, and updated guidance for handling complex proceedings. These sit on top of an arbitration framework based on the UNCITRAL Model Law, awards enforceable under the New York Convention and a judiciary that has already recognised cryptocurrencies as property and granted proprietary and freezing injunctions over them.

According to Benedict Teo, director of dispute resolution at Drew & Napier, the new rule set is tailored to the way crypto disputes actually unfold. "The SIAC Rules 2025 introduced significant enhancements which address various facets of crypto-related disputes, such as the risk of asset dissipation across borders and multiplicity of claims by individual investors bringing separate claims arising from, or which are connected to, the same crypto investment project," he says.

At the centre of the update is a more flexible and faster emergency relief framework. Parties can now seek the appointment of an emergency arbitrator even before lodging a notice of arbitration, as long as that notice follows within seven days, and they can ask for a protective preliminary order on an ex parte basis. The emergency arbitrator must decide on that application within 24 hours of appointment, and the applicant must notify the counterparty within 12 hours once the order is issued. Teo says this reflects the realities of digital-asset disputes. "Being able to obtain relief in a short amount of time is often crucial in crypto-related disputes, to prevent the dissipation of digital assets," he notes.

The rules also aim to prevent crypto projects from generating a patchwork of inconsistent outcomes when many investors sue separately. SIAC can now consolidate multiple arbitrations arising from the same or related transactions, and it can run coordinated proceedings in which separate cases are heard together or aligned on key procedural issues where they share common questions of law or fact.

Teo said these mechanisms are particularly relevant to token sales, DeFi projects and staking arrangements that sit within the same ecosystem. "These procedural tools allow for the saving of time and costs, and the avoidance of inconsistent findings," he notes, adding that they "allow disputes in a multi-contract crypto environment to be resolved efficiently and coherently under Singapore's arbitral framework."

Alongside institutional rules, Singapore's courts have been filling in key gaps on the status of crypto assets. In ByBit Fintech, the High Court held that stablecoins such as USDT are capable of being held on trust, treating them as a legally protected proprietary interest and enabling proprietary claims and tracing. In CLM, the court issued proprietary and freezing injunctions over stolen cryptocurrency, even against unknown defendants, and ordered exchanges to provide identifying information so that wrongdoers could be traced.

According to Teo, these decisions show the bench adapting orthodox principles to new technology. "Singapore's courts have developed a strong body of case law that reinforces its reliability as a seat for crypto-related arbitration," he says, noting that the remedies "address the risk of asset dissipation and anonymity inherent in blockchain transactions."

As disputes involving DeFi protocols, DAOs and NFTs evolve, Teo expects Singapore's combination of court-driven clarity and institutional innovation to attract more cases. He says the country has "followed suit with most common law jurisdictions to develop a clear and coherent legal framework for crypto disputes," using well-established principles of property, trust and interim relief but "bringing much needed clarity to how such principles apply to digital assets."

With a maturing regulatory framework and a judiciary that has shown how it will treat crypto assets, Teo believes the direction of travel is clear. "Singapore is well positioned to attract an increasing volume of crypto-related arbitrations, which will in turn cultivate a deeper pool of experienced lawyers, arbitrators, and technical experts within Singapore, further strengthening the country's expertise in crypto dispute resolution and enhancing its ability to shape and influence the global landscape in this rapidly evolving sector," he says.