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Finnish Chief Wants to Cut Power of His Job

By HOWELL RAINES, Special to the New York Times

HELSINKI, Feb. 2— According to a Government official here, Mauno Koivisto once likened his mission as President of Finland to that of the character played by Gary Cooper in "High Noon."

"Koivisto sees himself as the lonely sheriff who came and threw the villains out of town," said the official, who asked not to be named. "That's how he sees his role in Finnish politics - to throw out the old Kekkonen gang."

Urho Kekkonen was president for 25 years before Mr. Koivisto, a sociologist with a deadpan manner, replaced him in 1982. Mr. Koivisto used much of his first term breaking the power of the associates who wielded tremendous influence under Mr. Kekkonen, who died in 1985 at the age of 85.

By winning 47.9 percent of the popular vote in the national election on Monday, Mr. Koivisto virtually assured that he will be chosen for a second six-year term when Finland's electoral college convenes on Feb. 15.

In interviews today, Government officials and diplomats predicted that Mr. Koivisto will use his second term to complete the dismantling of the Kekkonen legacy.

By the time he leaves office in 1994, they said, Mr. Koivisto plans to have limited the powers of the presidency so that no one can ever again be as powerful as Mr. Kekkonen was.

Mr. Koivisto was Prime Minister twice, including a frustrating two years from 1979 to 1981, when an increasingly autocratic Mr. Kekkonen was holding on to office despite declining health.

"I think that's when Koivisto acquired his philosophy of a less interfering president," said Max Jakobson, a former United Nations diplomat and a leading political historian here.

As Prime Minister, Mr. Koivisto became convinced that many of the constitutional powers used by Mr. Kekkonen ought to be "powers of last resort rather than powers used whenever the President felt like it," a former Government official said. He also became convinced that the nation's founders never contemplated a President who would try to hold on for a quarter century.

So on the campaign trail, Mr. Koivisto advocated a two-term limit on the presidency, dilution of the

President's veto power and a law that would give the Prime Minister and Cabinet a voice in the dissolving of governments, currently the President's sole prerogative.

In his final campaign rally last Saturday, Mr. Koivisto, a Social Democrat, spoke with uncharacteristic feeling about the changes he has sought. Aging was an inevitable part of life, he said.

"It happened to Mr. Kekkonen and it will happen to me," he said to a crowd of 7,000. But Finnish election law, he said, should not allow the aging process to make the entire nation hostage to the "geriatric problem" of one person.

Mr. Koivisto's supporters responded warmly, but not everyone agreed. Paavo Vayrynen, a former Foreign Minister, ran as what one observer called "the ghost of Kekkonen." He finished second with 20.1 percent of the vote, putting him and Mr. Kekkonen's old Center Party in excellent position for the 1994 presidential race.

At 41 years of age, Mr. Vayrynen has no interest in limiting the next President to 12 years in office. And as leader of an oppositon party that controls 40 of 200 seats in Parliament, Mr. Vayrynen may be able to make a good fight against Mr. Koivisto's program.

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