Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman delivered the following statement Feb. 11: "In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate, citizens, during these very difficult circumstances Egypt is going through, President Hosni Mubarak has decided to step down from the office of president of the republic and has charged the high council of the armed forces to administer the affairs of the country. May God help everybody."

Suleiman's statement is the clearest indication thus far that the military has carried out a coup led by Defense Minister Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi. It is not clear whether Suleiman will remain as the civilian head of the army-led government. Egypt is returning to the 1952 model of ruling the state via a council of army officers. The question now is to what extent the military elite will share power with its civilian counterparts.

At a certain point, the opposition's euphoria will subside and demands for elections will be voiced. The United States, while supportive of the military containing the unrest, also has a strategic need to see Egypt move toward a more pluralistic system.

Whether the military stays true to its commitment to hold elections on schedule in September remains to be seen. If elections are held, however, the military must have a political vehicle in place to counter opposition forces, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. The fate of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) thus lies in question. Without the NDP, the regime will have effectively collapsed and the military could run into greater difficulty in running the country. While the military council will be serving as the provisional government, it will likely want to retain as much of the ruling NDP as possible and incorporate elements of the opposition to manage the transition. Sustaining its hold over power while crafting a democratic government will be the biggest challenge for the military as it tries to avoid regime change while also dealing with a potential constitutional crisis.

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