

Enthusiasm for Oscar-nominated *I'm Still Here* intersects with burning political issues in Brazil

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28 February 2025

As Sunday's 2025 Academy Awards ceremony approaches, Walter Salles' film *I'm Still Here* (*Ainda Estou Aqui*) is gaining increasing prominence in Brazil's cultural and political life.

More than 5 million Brazilians went to the cinemas to see the film, which is already the fifth highest grossing in the country's history. The popular enthusiasm for the film's nominations at the Oscars, where it is competing in three categories, including Best Picture, an unprecedented feat for Brazilian cinema, is perhaps an even more massive phenomenon. Costumes of actress Fernanda Torres, who plays the main character in *I'm Still Here*, have even become the main trend at this year's Carnival, the main national festival, which starts on Saturday.

Other more serious political expressions have been reported. One user commented on Reddit:

In Brazil, this film struck a nerve with audiences in a visceral way I'd never seen before. I went to the first screening in my city and the room was packed. As the credits began rolling, loud applause erupted and between the claps you could hear so many sniffles and people wiping their eyes. I even saw a couple of older viewers, who likely had lived through the era portrayed in the film, raising their fists and calling out, "Ditadura nunca mais" ["Never again to dictatorship"]. It was a moment that went beyond the screen, and from what I've seen on social media, this same reaction played out in theaters all over the country. You had to be there to truly grasp it.

Described by the WSWS as "a serious portrait of life under the military dictatorship in Brazil," *I'm Still Here* tells the story of the disappearance of Rubens Paiva, a Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) politician murdered by the military regime in the early 1970s, and the subsequent fight for justice led by his wife, Eunice Paiva (played by Torres).

The massive impact of *I'm Still Here* intersects deeply with burning political issues confronting Brazilian society. The film's success is undoubtedly linked to the recognition by significant sections of the population that resolving the current acute political crisis is impossible without a serious reckoning with the country's history.

In particular, it is seen as essential to finally come to terms with the crimes and dark legacy of the 1964-85 military dictatorship, felt today more acutely than ever.

Last week, former president Jair Bolsonaro and 33 allies were indicted by the Attorney General's Office (PGR) for attempting a coup d'état to violently abolish the democratic order in Brazil. Those accused in the fascist conspiracy that culminated in the January 8, 2023 uprising in Brasilia are mostly military personnel, including seven generals and former commanders of the Armed Forces.

The fascist forces, presently mounting a counter-offensive in conjunction with Donald Trump's administration in the US and preparing for another coup, have not let the repercussions of *I'm Still Here* go unnoticed. Bolsonaro himself expressed his deep displeasure at the popularity of the film.

In a recent interview, when asked if he was also cheering for an Oscar for the Brazilian film and actress, the fascist former president turned up his nose and declared: "The message there is political. She [Torres] said, for example, that in my government I wouldn't have made that movie."

Making it clear that he has not and will not watch it, Bolsonaro cynically said: "The movie had to start with me." He explained:

Look, the Paiva family, you have to speak about Eldorado Paulista, my town. You have to speak about May 1970, when [Carlos] Lamarca passed through town.... Why did Lamarca find that guerrilla site? It may have nothing to do with Rubens Paiva. It could be, but it's hardly so.

A young officer during the transition to civilian rule in the mid-1980s, Bolsonaro built a parliamentary career on his willingness to openly defend the most heinous crimes and the most notorious torturers of the dictatorship. In 2018, such a grotesque political figure was elevated to the highest post in the Brazilian republic.

At different times, the former president has alluded in speeches to his origins in the Ribeira Valley, the poorest region of the state of São Paulo, where he was born in 1955. Promoting a myth about the start of his political evolution, Bolsonaro claimed to have helped, as a teenager, in the military operation that pursued Carlos Lamarca and his guerrilla group linked to the Revolutionary Popular Vanguard (VPR).

Rubens Paiva, whose "disappearance" is portrayed in *I'm Still Here*, has family origins in Eldorado Paulista, where Bolsonaro was born. Rubens' father, Jaime Paiva, was an influential landowner who became mayor of the town and, later, a state deputy for ARENA

(National Renewal Alliance), the party of the military dictatorship. The son followed a different road.

Since the 1990s, Bolsonaro has peddled the completely fabricated narrative that Rubens Paiva—who was arrested by security forces in his own home in Rio de Janeiro—was actually executed by VPR guerrilla fighters. In a 2012 congressional speech, he asserted: “When Rubens Paiva was detained by the Army and released, he was captured and executed by Lamarca’s group. The blame falls on the Armed Forces.”

During a ceremony in 2014 that unveiled a bust of Rubens Paiva in Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies, bringing together relatives of victims of the military dictatorship, Bolsonaro staged a disgusting fascist provocation. He approached the statue and spat on it, cursing: “damn communist!”

The personal hatred nurtured against Paiva, a representative of bourgeois reformism in Brazilian political history, intersects with the broader political perspective embodied by Bolsonaro. This view, deeply rooted within the military, regards any democratic concession to the working class as an inadmissible weakness of the ruling class in the midst of a life-and-death struggle against the constant threat of socialist revolution.

These political issues were raised in recent interviews with Marcelo Rubens Paiva, son of the Paiva couple and author of the book of the same name that inspired *I’m Still Here*.

Speaking to *Canal Democracia* in a program aired on Tuesday, Marcelo noted that the claim that “in 1985 the military left power” was false. “The military never left [power],” he said. “They never left the academies, they never left the IMLs (Legal Medical Institute), they never left the SNI (National Information Service). The SNI remained intact, repression remained intact. No military personnel were arrested, you see. The guy who was in the DOI-CODI (Information Operations Detachment- Internal Defense Operations Center) became a ‘bicheiro’ [a form of illegal gambling] in Niterói. The training of the military is the same, [that’s] where Bolsonaro’s generation came from.”

Elsewhere in the interview, Paiva highlighted the importance of the discovery that the wife of retired Army Gen. José Antônio Nogueira Belham was an adviser to Bolsonaro during his term as a federal deputy in 2003. Paiva said:

It makes a lot of sense. You see this fixation that the ex-president has with torturers; with the DOI-CODI; with Brilhante Ustra, this criminal, who was from the DOI-CODI in São Paulo, who tortured mothers, fathers, and children; and General Belham, from the DOI-CODI in Rio de Janeiro, where my father was imprisoned.

Why was this guy’s story important? Because one thing my family never understood... [is] why my mother and sister were arrested the next day... It was after seeing the tactics of the DOI-CODI... that I realized they had arrested my mother and sister to torture them in front of my father.... But my father, 24 hours later, was already half-dead, according to some witnesses.

That was the spirit of the 1970s and that was the spirit brought to Brazil by the previous [Bolsonaro] government.

Belham, who was named in 2014 by the Truth Commission as one of the four military officers responsible for the torture and murder of

Rubens Paiva, but had his case dropped, is still alive and residing in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Last Monday, his house was the target of a protest organized by Levante Popular da Juventude, a political satellite of the Workers Party (PT).

As much as the PT itself has sought to ride the wave of popularity of *I’m Still Here*, the resurgence of awareness and rejection of the crimes and military murderers who remain unpunished directly cuts across efforts by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s government to curry favor with the fascist military.

About a year ago, on the 60th anniversary of the 1964 military coup, the Socialist Equality Group (GSI) highlighted the politically criminal attempt by Lula and his government to erase the memory and diminish the political relevance of the military dictatorship.

After canceling any public event linked to the anniversary, Lula declared that the coup “is part of history,” that the current generals “weren’t even born” in 1964 and that the Brazilian people should “know how to move history forward, [instead of] always dwelling on it, always dwelling on it.”

In response, the GSI declared: “Lula’s statements are remarkable in light of recent events. The bourgeois PT government’s nervousness about the issue is directly proportional to the renewed relevance of the lessons of the 1964 coup for the Brazilian and international working class.”

The political implications of *I’m Still Here* were further demonstrated in an attack suffered by Marcelo Rubens Paiva last Sunday during a pre-carnival parade in São Paulo. After having his presence announced on the microphone, Paiva, who is wheelchair-bound and was in a fenced-off area, was booed by members of the public and attacked with a beer can and other objects thrown by an attendee.

The link between the attack on Paiva and the rising fascist political forces is clear. In another part of his interview with *TV Democracia*, the author stressed that the success of the film, not only in Brazil, is connected to the development of a growing global political response against this phenomenon.

“This family [his own] ended up being a portrait of something that is happening all over the world. Fascism is on the rise in Italy, the prime minister has fascist inspirations, there are fascist salutes now at every demonstration,” Paiva said. He also cited the resurgence of the far right in France and Germany and declared that “The United States is already living a dictatorship.” Trump is “a real dictator, who is already interfering in Brazilian politics through his mascot, or I don’t know if he’s Elon Musk’s mascot. In Argentina there’s Milei. It’s a catastrophe that’s happening in the world.... So, the story of a woman who has empathy the size of the country ends up seducing millions of people.”



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