

Rubens Paiva: Presente! How ‘I’m Still Here’ challenges Brazil’s resurgent far-right

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Rubens Paiva appears with his children

on the beach. A civil engineer who served in Congress as a member of the Brazilian Labor Party, Pavia was tortured and murdered by the U.S.-backed military dictatorship in Brazil in 1971.

The commercial and critical success of the 2024 film “I’m Still Here” represents a triumph for the Brazilian people. Directed by Walter Salles, the movie is based on the 2015 book of the same name written by Rubens Paiva’s son, Marcelo Rubens Paiva.

The film narrates the story of Rubens Paiva’s “disappearance” from the perspective of his wife, Eunice Paiva. If you spend time in the film corner of social media, you might have seen the enthusiasm of Brazilians with the international success of the movie, being the first Brazilian film to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards.

Set in the scenic Leblon neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro in 1971, the movie tells a story well-known to many Brazilians. Rubens Paiva is one of the few martyrs from the U.S.-backed right-wing military dictatorship whose name has endured despite right-wing efforts to erase it from public memory. In schools, Paiva’s story was taught as an example of the senseless cruelty inflicted by the military dictatorship on the Brazilian people, alongside others such as Vladimir Herzog and Stuart Angel.

Rubens Paiva, a former congressman of the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) and a civil engineer, was taken from his family home by armed men. His wife Eunice and 15-year-old daughter Vera were also taken. While Vera returned home after 24 hours, and Eunice was only released after 12 days of detention, Rubens Paiva never came home, and his remains were never found.

In 2014, a bust of Rubens Paiva was unveiled in the House of Representatives in

Brasília. This was a poignant tribute to a man who had been “disappeared” by the right-wing dictatorship. During a small ceremony attended by Paiva’s surviving family members, Congressman Jair Bolsonaro left his office and approached the gathering. He shouted, “Rubens Paiva got what he deserved, disgraced communist, bum!” Paiva’s nephew, Chico Paiva Avelino, later recounted in a Facebook post that Bolsonaro spat on the bust before walking away.

This incident marked the first time I heard about the man who would later become Brazil’s president. I remember being shocked by his blatant disrespect for the family members of someone I considered a hero. How could someone be so crass? I was certain his behavior would be deemed unacceptable by people across the political spectrum.

By 2018, when Bolsonaro won the presidential election, he had shown what Avelino described as an “obsession” with Rubens Paiva. Bolsonaro vehemently opposed investigating the cases of those who were “disappeared” by the military dictatorship and consistently blamed Rubens Paiva’s death on the political left.

Since Bolsonaro’s election, nostalgic sentiment for the repressive military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 has only intensified. The shock I initially felt at the crass attitude of a minor political figure in 2014 has now permeated the country. Brazilians are grappling with the reality of a significant political faction that claims the country was better during the dictatorship and advocates for the reinstatement of military rule.

At the time, the military justified his disappearance with the same excuse Bolsonaro would later claim to be true: that Paiva had been rescued from detention by left-wing comrades. Only decades later, in 1996, did the truth surface through the National Truth Commission, which investigated the crimes of the military dictatorship; it was revealed that the former congressman had died due to injuries related to torture on the second day of his imprisonment. His wife fought

courageously and tirelessly for the truth.

The story told in “I’m Still Here” is not exactly the entire account of Rubens and Eunice Paiva’s lives or all of the oppression exerted by the military during the dictatorship. But it presents the experience of Eunice Paiva through her husband’s disappearance and her strength to deal with its aftermath. It is brilliantly portrayed by Fernanda Torres — nominated for Best Actress at the Academy Awards and Brazil’s favorite nepobaby (her mother, Fernanda Montenegro, was also nominated for the same award 25 years ago for the movie “Central Station,” also directed by Walter Salles).

Brazilians are celebrating the success of “I’m Still Here” with good reason. The film portrays a true story from a period of oppression that should not evoke nostalgia. It serves as a powerful reminder of how dangerously close Brazil came to experiencing another right-wing military coup when Bolsonaro took power in 2018. It reminds us that, as the film’s theme song suggests, we must remain vigilant, for danger always lurks around the corner.

“I’m Still Here” is currently playing in theaters everywhere in the United States.

For further reading on the role the United States played in the Brazilian military dictatorship, see Vincent Bevins’s [I’m Still Here](#).

